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CHRISTIANITY

A N D

FREE-THINKING:

I N T H R E E

DISCOURSES.

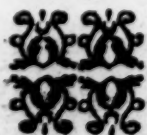
I. *Containing an ARGUMENT for a Fair and Serious ENQUIRY into the GROUNDS of RELIGION.*

II. *A VINDICATION of the RIGHT of PRIVATE JUDGMENT in Opposition to AUTHORITY.*

III. *A CAUTION against the CAUSES of a WRONG JUDGMENT.*

Delivered publickly in SKINNERS-HALL, and now Published with ADDITIONS, for the AUTHOR'S Vindication.

By a LAY-MAN.



EDINBURGH,

Printed by Mr. JAMES DAVIDSON at a COM-
PANY, and Sold at the said Mr. James David-
son's Shop, and other Book-sellers in Town, 1727.



ADVERTISEMENT.



NE Reason the Author of these following Discourses had to publish them, rather than some others, which cost him more Pains, was the unfavourable Judgment which some pass'd upon them, and upon his own Intention. As they were delivered in Consequence of a very disinterested Proposal for the publick Good, the Author had no Reason to suspect the Benevolence of the Hearers; but some did not relish the Proposal, and therefore, it seems, resolved, at any Rate, to be very angry with the Proposer. What real Occasion he gave them to suspect his good Intentions, either with Respect to Religion in general, or the particular Establishment of it in this Country, he appeals to the Judgment of every impartial Reader. Every Man, however inconsiderable, owes so much to his own Character, that he cannot be wanting to its just Vindication, without an Injury both to himself and the Publick: A sufficient Apology,

no doubt, for publishing some Discourses, which have nothing either new in the Subject, or very extraordinary in the Way of handling it, to recommend them. These Disadvantages, of which the Author is sufficiently sensible, while they afford a clear Proof, how much more he values his Character as a Christian, than his Reputation as an Author, give him a fair Occasion of making this small Addition to the many ordinary Performances upon Religion.

The Importance of the Subject may, 'tis hoped, however recommend them to every Body's Perusal, who is more apt to be taken with solid Sentiments, than the Finery of Language, or a pompous Parade of Words with very little Meaning. This is the more to be noticed, that the Author of the following Discourses never intended, by his Proposal, to seek an Occasion of setting his Rhetorick to Show; but to contribute his Mite to the publick Instruction, in a Manner which might declare that he had really no other Intention in making it.

In a Word, as the Pleasure of a virtuous Action lies in the Consciousness of a good Design, he chuses not only to profess, but even to prove, (so far as a Declaration, together with the Evidence of the Thing, can amount to a Proof) That he enjoys all the Pleasure which can arise from such a Reflection.

A Benevolence so disinterested will, it may be, be a sufficient Attonement, either for the supposed Fault of delivering these Discourses, or of publishing them; and pretends to entitle the Author,

if

if not to the good Opinion, yet at least to the
Forgiveness of the Publick.

Or if the Presumption of talking so publickly
without a Licence, be an unpardonable Fault,
'tis expected that some Person in another Cha-
racter will undertake to explain the true Grounds
of Religion, at a Time when such an Undertaking
is highly necessary; and nothing appears so
incredible among the Pretenders to Reason and
Philosophy, as the Christian Religion.

The Author having already explained the true
Grounds of Natural Religion, has acquitted him-
self of any Obligation, which his Proposal could
lay upon a mere Lay-man.



DIS-



To be added to the Advertisement.

The Author is sensible that some Expressions in the second Discourse, are capable of a very different Sense from what he intended; but he expects that the Reader will peruse the Whole before he pass a Judgment, and with all the Attention which is necessary to enter into the Argument.

As he had no Design to make Reflections upon the Conduct of particular Men, so if any Thing he has advanced may seem to be severe, he declares that no Body is concerned in it, but those who plead for an Authority inconsistent with that Christian Liberty which he undertook to defend.

A Liberty as expressly asserted in that excellent System of Doctrine, which is the Standard in this established Church, as it has been universally defended by all the Friends of Liberty and Protestant Religion in every other.

In Fine, he has not the least Suspicion that the Principles he has laid down, have any Tendency to weaken the Obligation which every Man is under to endeavour to understand the Bible, and to make use of all proper Helps to that Purpose, and promises that as soon as he shall be made sensible of the contrary, he shall gladly sacrifice his Free-thinking to his Christianity.

E R R A T A.

Page 69, for Priestcraft, read something worse. p. 116. l. 18. or Religion, r. in Religion. Attachment for, r. to.

To be added to the Advertisement.

The Author is sensible that some Hapless
in the second Dispute, are sensible of a
different result from what he intended; but he
trusts that the Reader will pardon the
Author's Judgment, and with all the
reason which he has to offer into the



DISCOURSE I.

Concerning the DUTY of a free Enquiry into RELIGION.



ALL who have any Taste of Virtue and Knowledge, allow, That the highest Excellence of human Nature lies in the Improvements of the Mind, and that, by these Attainments, we arrive at that Perfection, of which Creatures of a lower Species are incapable, and a Resemblance of those Beings, who move in a Sphere above us.

2. THE Progress of the Mind, in Pursuits of this Kind, is always accompanied with a Pleasure, which more than sufficiently rewards the Pains. That every Man is in the same Proportion happy, as he is wise and virtuous, is a Truth of so much undoubted Certainty, that no general Observation, perhaps, admits of fewer

fewer Exceptions. 'Twould be a very useless Task to be at Pains to prove what is confirm'd by daily Experience, and by the Sense of every Man, who is not an absolute Stranger to Reflexion.

3. WISDOM and Virtue again are inseparable Companions, the first being a necessary Support and Defence to the last. Both these Perfections take their Rise from Knowledge ; or, in other Words, a Man cannot be wise or virtuous, unless he have a just Apprehension of the true Nature of Things, and the different Degrees of real Worth which belongs to them, or what Relation of Importance the several Objects, with which he is conversant, truly bear, either to his present or future Happiness.

4. As a Man cannot make a right Choice, in the general Course of his Actions, unless he has acquired a Taste of Good and Evil, and can distinguish in all Circumstances, and under every Appearance, what really promotes his Happiness, from what has a contrary Tendency ; the true Art of Life will be to learn perfectly this Distinction, and to conduct all our Actions, by a true discerning of the Nature of Things, and the different Consequences of different Actions.

FROM this Observation it appears, That as Wisdom and Virtue chiefly consist in the right Conduct of our Life and Actions ; that Knowledge, which is essential to Virtue, must consist not in any Metaphysical Skill, but in

a true Taste of Good and Evil, what makes for or against our Happiness. As this Piece of Improvement is not to be acquired by nice and Philosophical Enquiries about the Nature of Things, we are not obliged to employ our Faculty in this Way, in order to be happy: The Reason is, because difficult Speculations are of no real Use to the Conduct of human Life; and therefore can signifie nothing in the Pursuit of that Knowledge and Vertue, from which all lasting Happiness and Self-enjoyment must arise. Besides, human Nature is so framed by its beneficent Author, that every Man in the lowest Sphere of Life, and the narrowest Capacity of Mind, is capable of certain Degrees of Happiness; whereas very few are able to derive any great Pleasure from Speculation, or to make any tolerable Improvement in the Sciences.

THE Knowledge therefore to which illiterate and uninquisitive Minds must owe their Satisfaction, must be something of a very different Kind; it must ly in such Improvement of Reason, as is suitable to their particular Capacity and Sphere of Action; that is, in other Words, in those simple Perceptions of Good and Evil, Right and Wrong, of which every Man whatsoever is more or less capable. Now it cannot be denied, that there are Abundance of useful Truths, which are level to every Man's Apprehension, who can think at all, and of which a Girl can judge of with as much Certainty as the Men of Speculation.

THE Knowledge of these obvious Truths is of the greatest Importance to every Man's Happiness, whether they are the plain Notions of Morality, or the Rules of right Behaviour, or some other Propositions which relate to Practice, either immediately, or by a necessary Consequence. These are Matters which every Man is obliged to understand, as he values his own Happiness, and which the Author of Nature has sufficiently declared to be the universal Source of Virtue and Self-enjoyment, by making them the proper Food of every vulgar, thinking Mind: Whereas every other Sort of Knowledge, is not only above the Reach of ordinary Men, but indeed is an Attainment which the common Necessities of Life makes impracticable, as they leave the greatest Part of Men very little Time for Speculation. But suppose Mankind were generally qualified for such Improvements, and had sufficient Time and Leisure to pursue them, it would be an effectual Discouragement to sober Minds, that few or none have succeeded in those Enquiries, and that we find nothing but endless Contention and Uncertainty about the Matters of Difficulty; a plain Argument that Philosophy is not our Province, and that the Sphere of human Improvement must ly some where else; as well as a just Punishment of a vain aspiring to Knowledge, in Matters which vastly exceed the Proportion of the best human Understanding.

6. WOULD we therefore be as easy and happy as a due Exercise of our Reason can make us, we must turn our Thoughts to the Study of Practice, and that Knowledge which is subservient to Virtue. In order to understand what is really useful, we must check the impertinent Desire to know what is not so, and not suffer an unreasonable Fondness of Science to transport us beyond the Limits which Nature has prescribed to our Faculties. By this Method the most forward Minds will be content with such Degrees of Knowledge, as sufficiently answer all the real Occasions and valuable Purposes of Life and Happiness; every Design to be farther wise, would appear to us, in this View, either a meer Amusement, or a dangerous Sacrifice to Vanity; as the Beginning of Torment and fruitless Labour, which will every Day increase with our imaginary Discoveries, and in the End lead us either to the Melancholy of disappointed Ambition, or that Pride of Understanding, which is the ordinary Effect of a vain Endeavour to be wise.

WHEREAS would we confine our Thirst of Knowledge to what is plain and easily attainable, such a modest Use of our Reason would certainly turn to Account; we would feel the Pleasure, and every Day enjoy the Advantage of such Acquisitions: In short, we would have all the Benefit which can accrue to Men by intellectual Improvements, without the Toil and Vanity which ordinarily ac-

companies the useless and romantick Pursuits of Knowledge.

7. WHILE a Man entertains such an Opinion of his own Understanding, as incapable of making any great Discoveries in Knowledge, he is naturally pleased with the Thoughts of Religion. As there is nothing of greater Importance than the Notices we receive from Revelation, concerning the right Conduct of human Life; and as the sober Part of Mankind have always considered it as the only Instructor in the true Method to be happy; a Man sensible of his Ignorance, easily gives into the Proofs of Religion. While his Mind is refreshed by the useful Instruction he derives from thence, he finds no Difficulty to believe that the Author was Divine. According to this View of Things, it would be unnatural to grudge the necessary Pains of a serious Enquiry into the Reasons and Grounds of Faith; for as all Men have a strong Desire of Happiness, they must be willing to use the proper Methods of obtaining Satisfaction. Now the Conduct of Life, according to the Rules of Religion, easily appears to an unprejudiced Mind, a very hopeful Project to make People as happy as human Frailty will admit; and this Conformity of our Actions to the Laws of Religion, naturally supposes some Knowledge of the Reasons and Grounds upon which they are supposed to be Divine.

A Person therefore who would be happy, and rightly apprehends in what Methods of
Life

Life that Happiness consists, will be very much disposed to carry the Argument for Religion as far as it will go. He will endeavour to enlarge his Discoveries in the Proof of it, by a due Use of his Reason, and the proper Means of Instruction, in order to acquire a Certainty, additional to that general Evidence which has already disposed him to be a Believer.

As for those Persons who have a Bias on the other Side, and are willing to favour every Prejudice against Religion; whatever the Force of Prepossession may be in People of this Sort, it is plain, they cannot make a Conclusion against Religion, with any Pretence of Reason, till they have thoroughly examined the Matter; Justice and common Sense require they should suspend their Judgment, till they are provided with sufficient Means of Enquiry, and make the best Use of them. The farthest a Man can go with Equity in the Circumstances of Ignorance, is to own he knows nothing of the Matter, and therefore is not a competent Judge, whether there is such a Thing as Religion or not. If such a Person pretends to be decisive in his Judgment about Religion, or to laugh it as a Thing ridiculous, 'tis plain he cannot excuse such a Conduct, by pretending he wants Evidence. On the contrary, all his dogmatizing in favour of Atheism and Irreligion, must either suppose that he has acquired the utmost Certainty, or show that he acts with the greatest

est Rashness and Absurdity. Religion may be true and divine, for all he knows to the contrary; he may laugh only because he does not understand, and then he is as ridiculous as he is ignorant.

THE Knowledge which a Man can acquire by ordinary Methods, of the true Grounds of Religion, must ever be in Proportion to his Capacity, the Occasions of Learning, and the Pains he has taken to understand them; and no Man can have more Reason to reject Religion, than he has a real Knowledge of the Reasons upon which it is built.

NOW the Proof of Religion is of a complex Nature, and comprehends a good Variety of Ideas and Reasoning; so that a Man must be very well instructed before he can pronounce the Sentence. He must not only understand what may be said against, but all that may be advanced in favour of Religion; he must clearly perceive, after a distinct Survey of all the Objections and all the Answers, that the greatest Weight is on the one Side; nay, before a Man can make any certain Judgment against Religion, he must be undoubtedly sure that nothing can be true, against which there are unanswerable Objections. And this will oblige him to know all the Degrees of Possibility. Besides, he must not only know that certain Relations are false and impossible, but that the Supposition of their Falseness, or even Impossibility, is a Proof against Religion. Either of which certainly im-

implies a Degree of Knowledge, to which no Man can with Modesty lay claim to. For who, at the Distance of Two thousand Years, can pretend to Certainty, that certain Events never happened? Or that upon the contrary Supposition, no Evidence can arise from thence in favour of Religion? Or that Religion may not be true, tho' some pious Frauds have been invented to defend and support it?

LET us suppose therefore, that a Person has been at the utmost Pains to understand the Force of every Argument for or against Religion, and has enjoyed for a long Time, and made the best Use of all the possible Occasions of Learning; 'tis plain he can never be in a Condition to say with absolute Certainty, that all the Arguments for Religion are of no Weight.

8. CREDULITY is a Fault which People may be guilty of on both Sides of the Question. As too many swallow down Religion, without being at the Pains of Enquiry, there are Abundance, on the contrary, who are induced to reject it, merely by the Strength of an head-strong and ignorant Prejudice. If the ignorant Believer is to blame for taking upon Trust what ought to be the Subject of a serious Enquiry, his Easiness will not excuse a credulous Infidelity.

BUT if we would compare the Excess of Belief on either Side, it may be Credulity for Irreligion shows much the worse Temper.
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To believe Religion without Trial, expreffes fomewhat of good Nature, which attones for the Unreasonablenefs of fuch a Conduct. An eafy Temper, Modesty and Self-diffidence, readily difpofes a Man to an exceffive Submiffion to the Judgment of others; and a high Relifh of moral Virtue may incline a Man to favour a Pretence which appears neceffary to fupport it. But fcarce any of thefe good Qualities has any apparent Connexion with a credulous Infidelity. What favourable Difpofitions for moral Virtue can an Unbeliever be fupposed to have, who rejects the beft Affiftances and ftrongeft Motives to the Practice of Virtue? Where is the Modesty of rejecting without Evidence, what the Community receives with Veneration? Or what Regard to Truth appears in refufing to act upon the ordinary Grounds of Affent, or of yielding to the fame Evidence for Religion, which we every Day reckon fufficient to determine us in other Matters? That every Unbeliever is chargeable with this Partiality, every Author upon the Chriftian Religion has endeavoured to prove; from whence they have inferred no unreafonable Suspicion, That if Men were not Unbelievers from Motives they are unwilling to own, they could have no Concern to defend Opinions which can be of no real Advantage to Society; they would not go about to difabufe the World, with the Loſs of the greateſt Advantages to Society, and the utmoſt Danger to Morality; I ſay of a harmleſs

less Mistake, which is chargeable with no bad Consequences.

9. IF Credulity, or too easy Belief in the ordinary Concerns of Life, be justly blameable, the same Fault will be exceedingly more unreasonable where Religion is concerned; the higher Degrees of Importance in the last, will aggravate every Instance of Religious Credulity. Nothing is more certain than that according to the real or supposed Consequence of an Affair, and the Danger of a Mistake in the Conduct of it, every Man is necessarily obliged to use more or less Caution, and the more Caution the Reason and Nature of Things require of us, in the same Proportion we are to blame, if we proceed without a due Consideration and Regard to the Consequences.

EVERY Body must acknowledge (whether he judges that Religion is something real, or a Mistake of Fancy) that it is a Matter of vast Importance, to the private Satisfaction and Peace of every Enquirer, to the Welfare and Prosperity of Communities, and to the universal Good and Advantage of Mankind.

'TIS a Matter of Fact, that we every Day experience the good or bad Effects of *Faith* or *Infidelity*; that those who are apt to make no Difference between them, are frequently made sensible of it, by the different Consequences, with respect to themselves and others, which flow from these different Principles.

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BUT this is not all. 'Tis possible we may have an Interest to enquire into Religion, which reaches beyond the Grave. We must not indeed suppose a future Existence, before we are sufficiently informed as to the Reasonableness of Religion; but then we are not to suppose the contrary neither.

THAT certain Degrees of Happiness or Unhappiness will be the Consequence of the different Behaviour of moral Agents, is at least possible, whether there is such a Thing as revealed Religion or not. And put the Case lowest, that the natural Arguments for a future State were of no Weight, it cannot however be denied that the Thing is possible, seeing we have no Demonstration to the contrary.

BUT we may well allow a Probability to the Opinion of a future Existence, because it has a necessary Connexion with the Being of God, which is both probable and certain. If there is such a Being of infinite Perfection, a Man must expose himself to all the Effects of his Displeasure, who neglects a serious Enquiry into Religion, or takes up with a groundless Prejudice against it. It is probable, at least, that he may some Time or other fare the worse for his Negligence. A Consideration really of more Weight than a Thousand unexamined Objections against the Truth of Religion.

9. A Man must be very much to blame, who neglects to enquire into the Reasons of Revealed Religion, if he acknowledges such a Thing

Thing as natural. All the Evidence we have for the Existence of a Being supremely good, who interests himself in the Fate of rational Agents, naturally leads to the Conclusion, that there must be some Revelation.

FOR what is Revelation, but an extraordinary Assistance vouchsafed to Mankind, suitable to their present Circumstances; a Light to direct ignorant Mortals in the Road to Happiness, and a Provision for the Recovery of human Nature, from the most wretched Condition of Ignorance and Misery. Now what can be more suitable to our Ideas of perfect Goodness, than the Expectance of a Favour so great, and, tho' undeserved, so absolutely necessary? Who can easily think that the Author of Nature would suffer the best Part of our World, reasonable Beings, to wander endlessly in a vain Pursuit of Happiness, in all the By-paths of Error and Sin, without any Possibility of obtaining Satisfaction? Is it no Impeachment of the Wisdom of God, to suppose that Appetites should be given us, which were never to be gratify'd? Or have we any Ground from Experience to conclude, That Reason is a competent Guide, and every Man sufficient for his own Happiness? Or ought we to measure our Expectations from a Being perfectly Good, by our Deserts and Behaviour towards him? Nay, on the contrary, Is it not the Glory and Triumph of Goodness, to bestow Favours upon those who least deserve them? Suppose therefore, that Mankind had ungratefully

fully abused former Benefits, it would be a dishonourable Suspicion of perfect Benevolence, to infer from that Ingratitude, that nothing was to be expected further in the Way of Favour.

IN fine, We cannot easily imagine, that so strange a Composition of Folly and Ignorance, of Misery and Pride, as human Nature appears to be in its present State, should be the Offspring of perfect Wisdom and Goodness; and it will not be much easier, suppose that if Mankind had some Way or other reduced themselves to that unfortunate Condition, that the wise Author of Nature would suffer them to continue in an utter Incapacity for all the great and valuable Purposes of a rational Being.

THESE Considerations carry the Argument, for a serious Enquiry into Religion, higher, while they show how agreeable the Notion of Revealed Religion is to our exactest Apprehensions of the Divine Nature; and consequently that we have a probable Certainty that there must be some Revelation, even before we enquire into the Pretensions of any particular Religion.

10. IT cannot be denied, that this Way of Reasoning carries a plausible Appearance. But after all, we short-sighted Creatures, may mistake in a Metaphysical Argument from the Divine Perfections, insomuch that we cannot, from our narrow Notions, certainly determine what the Supreme Being ought to

to do, with Respect to sinful Men. However, the Expectation of Revealed Religion, or a supernatural Assistance, will be very reasonable, if there be no Contradiction or Impossibility in the Notion of the Thing. But before we can be sure, that God has actually vouchsafed Mankind that extraordinary Favour, we must consider both whether the Thing is possible, and likewise enter into the particular Proof, upon which any Form of Revealed Religion is founded.

As for the Possibility of Revelation, the Objection cannot ly here. There is nothing contradictory in the Supposition, that the Father of the Spirits of Men may convey to them extraordinary Light and Instruction, and confirm such Discoveries by the Evidence of undoubted Miracles.

No Man ever pretended to have found a Demonstration in Favour of Infidelity. Witty Men have endeavoured to perplex the Proofs of Religion, and to create Difficulties ; but it never was in their Power to make the Possibility of it appear uncertain. It was never demonstrated, that Miracles imply a Contradiction, or that the Supreme Being bears no Regard to the Welfare of his reasonable Creatures.

As for the particular Proofs of a Divine Revelation, they must stand or fall according to their own Evidence: These require a serious Examination according to their Weight and Importance. Before we have made this Trial, we cannot make any certain Judgment
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concerning the Character of any particular Form of Religion. After we have passed a Sentence upon particular Arguments, we can make no Conclusion from their Sufficiency or Insufficiency, either for or against a particular Revelation, unless they are of such Importance that the whole Stress of the Proof depends upon their Validity.

THE last Observation is of the 'more Importance, that the great Cause of a wrong Judgment about Religion, is a partial Consideration of those Evidences which are brought in Proof of it. If Unbelievers did not act this unfair Part, they would not be so apt to Triumph upon every Objection against a particular Argument, as if the Merit of the Cause depended upon its single Evidence.

II. A general View of the Christian Religion, and the Evidences which are brought in Proof of it, are very proper to excite a Man's Curiosity, and to engage him to a further Enquiry. As 'tis both possible and likely that there is some revealed Religion, it appears by a cursory Reflection, that no other Pretender bids fairer for that Character.

'Tis little to say, that Christianity appears, at first View, to be far preferable to the sensual Dreams of *Mahomet*, or the Idolatry of *Paganism*; that it has stood the Test of many Ages, and found a ready Entertainment by the Wifest and most Philosophical; and that it has engaged the Defence of some, who with the highest Pretensions to Learning and good

icular good Sense, had no Interest to believe this rather than any other particular Revelation.

THE Patrons of Christian Religion pretend, that the Gospel owed its Growth and Establishment to quite other Causes than those which gave Rise and Success to other Religions, and which afford a manifest Evidence of a Divine Original.

THEY alledge that the Doctrine of the Gospel is exactly suited to our best natural Apprehensions of the Deity.

THAT the Gospel contains a compleat System of the purest Morals.

THAT as the Doctrines of the Christian Religion have a natural Influence upon a good Practice, and a plain Tendency to promote every Instance of Behaviour which is beneficial to Mankind and Society; so the Precepts which it contains are much preferable to all the Maxims of Philosophy, both as they are better Rules of Conduct, and enforced by the strongest Motives.

THAT the Christian Religion has been confirmed by a Succession of miraculous Events, which accompany'd the first Preachers of the Gospel, and continued from the Author of that Religion, till the End of the second Century.

THIS is not a Place to show, that these Alledgances in Favour of Christianity are not groundless, and that the Religion of JESUS has all these pretended Advantages; 'tis enough to observe, that seeing natural Reason teaches
Men

Men to expect a Revelation, and seeing the Christian Religion has obtained so advantageous a Character, with Persons of undoubted Learning and Integrity; and seeing it is possible, that Christianity may be the true Religion, and all who are educated to the Belief of it, may be obliged to continue in that Profession, under the severest Penalties; there is at least an Obligation in Point of Prudence, and from the Reason of Things, upon every Man, to enquire particularly into the Validity of those Proofs upon which the Religion of the Country is founded; nor can any Reason justify the Neglect of such an impartial Enquiry, which is not sufficient to secure him against the Event. So much at least is Selfevident, that whether the Evidences of it are sufficient to convince him or not, he cannot pretend to judge of them before he has been at the due Pains to inform himself.

'Tis possible that a Person may have been so much accustomed to the Liberty of laughing at what he does not understand, that he may find a Difficulty to think in earnest about Religion. It may be, by a Custom of talking of Priestcraft, and pious Fraud, and a certain Association of Ideas, consequent thereto, the Words *Miracle* and *Legerdemain*, may always convey to his Mind the same Ideas; or it may be the Words, *Mystery* and *Nonsense*, have been so often confounded in his ordinary Dialect, that he cannot find a different Signification for them? But 'tis certainly much below

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A Person who pretends to think freely, to suffer himself to be enslaved to the Magick of Sounds, or the mechanical Force of a Custom, especially when his Character of Reason and good Sense lies at Stake, and he is fairly invited to employ a few serious Thoughts about a Religion, by Considerations which he never laid to Heart, and therefore cannot be in a Condition to confute.

12. A little Reflection upon the present State of Mankind, and the Necessities they labour under, wou'd be of some Use to cure People of an indecent Inclination to be diverted, when Religion is the Matter in Question. One would think, a Mind sensible of its own Ignorance and Misery, would have no Prejudice against the Offer of Relief and Instruction. 'Tis certain from every Man's Conscience, that the best and wisest of us all may stand very much in Need of Divine Assistance. Human Life, with all the Circumstances of Advantage, is a poor Thing, and falls infinitely short of Happiness. In the ordinary Appearance of human Weakness and Imperfection, to live is nothing very agreeable; and in some Instances of Suffering, it is a real Tragedy.

A Man in these Circumstances of Being, is at a wretched Pass, if he has no Consolation but what his Vanity can afford him; the Visions of Self-love, or the gay Scenes of Life, are a very insignificant Antidote against the Torment of certain Diseases, to which our

Bodies are liable, or the greater Torment of an anxious Mind.

LIFE very often sits so heavy, even upon a Man of Virtue, that he finds himself incapable of Relief any other Way, but by a perfect Cessation of Thought, or by such Reflections as Religion can only afford him.

IT cannot be denied, that Religion yields a Man the most effectual Ease, under all the Pressures of human Life; and that if there was any such Thing as the reasonable Prospect of a future Happiness, or any Amends for all the Distresses of a virtuous Sufferer, the Prospect would give a vast Satisfaction. It is infinitely to be wish'd, that we had some safe Conduct and Protection to depend upon, amidst all the Storms and Dangers of Life. We are able to do so little for our own Happiness, and other People are willing to do so little for us, that we are naturally disposed to seek Assistance from above. But alas! What Reason have we to expect Relief from that Quarter, if our Minds are without any Guide but their own purblind Reason, or our Life without any Pleasure, but what arises from external Objects, and the Entertainments of Sense?

WITH these Reflections, a Man must go a wandring after Pleasure or Ease, exposed to the first Chance that may knock him in the Head, unable to sustain the Weight of his own Imperfections, or to provide against a Thousand unforeseen Calamities, or to steer his Actions by any certain Method.

THESE

THESE, and other uncomfortable Thoughts, would beget in every Man a secret Wish, that there was some Rules of Conduct which we could certainly depend upon; certain Consolations to be had by the Unfortunate, which meer Thinking cannot afford them.

As Revealed Religion abundantly answers all these Necessities, a Man would naturally conclude, if Experience did not prove the contrary, that every Man would be prepossessed in favour of Religion, and that all our Prejudices would run that Way, and that even Self-love would make it unnatural for Men to entertain the secretest Desire, that there should be no Revealed Religion.

WHAT can we think then of such a dismal State of Mind, which puts Men under the wretched Necessity of seeking a Refuge in the Thought, that is otherwise the most melancholly, that the Supreme Being takes no Care of unhappy Mortals, or makes no Provision for the Supply of their most important Necessities.

13. IF Revealed Religion carried in it all the Evidence of a self-evident Truth, the Pains of Enquiry and Examination would be perfectly useless; Propositions of this Kind are immediately convincing, and leave the Understanding no Time to deliberate; but Matters of Difficulty, of which the Evidence does not presently strike us, require we should minutely examine every Circumstance belonging

to the Proof, and to suspend our Judgment till we have gone through the Trial.

How far Religion is a Matter of Difficulty, the numerous Objections which are apt to rise against it, even in an unprejudiced Mind, abundantly shows. Men may believe it upon the meer Authority of a Spiritual Guide, and swallow down entire Systems of Belief by a larger Credulity : But no Man ever reckoned an Assent so cheaply procured a rational Persuasion, no more than a Believer in *Turky* or *Japan*, or any other Slave to Prejudice and Education, can pass for Rational, or the Assent, which is the Product of Instruction and Enquiry, is to be compared with the blind and implicate Faith of a Roman Catholick.

FAITH, or Persuasion of the Truth of Religion, bears a plain Relation to Evidence, and Evidence expresses that Act of the Mind, by which we either immediately perceive that our Ideas agree or disagree ; or at least perceive that Agreement or Disagreement, after a due Information and deliberate Enquiry.

Now, if every reasonable Assent proceeds upon some Grounds, as nothing is more evident, it is plain every Point of Difficulty will require Examination, and the Truth of Religion, as well as any other Matter. For tho' the Importance of the Subject, and the particular Promise of God, may entitle a serious Enquirer to a particular Illumination from the Father of Lights, yet that Assistance does not suspend the Use of our natural Faculties,

ties, nor hinder their ordinary Exercise, but only enable us to perceive some Truths more distinctly, which Prejudice would otherwise conceal from us, or render obscure.

14. RELIGION has been in all Ages the Subject of very different Opinions, and every Country and Climate almost have professed a different Form of it.

THE Bulk of Men have all along taken their Religious Opinions upon Trust, and settled in that Belief, which Prejudice and early Instruction recommended to them. But nothing can be more pernicious than such a Credulity. For as there is only one true Religion, and an infinite Number of false Opinions about it, and as there are very different Sentiments among the several Sects and Denominations even of the right Belief, which are all contradictory one to another, and therefore cannot be all true; 'tis more than a Thousand to one, that the Persuasion which Education has given us, is false and erroneous; so that a Man may with as much Assurance of being in the Right, trust to the Decision of a Chance Throw, what Religion he should profess, as depend meerly upon an unexamined Prejudice in favour of a particular Religion.

WHAT Interest some have always had to impose upon others, in Matters of this kind, is too well known; and how easily some have been bubbled out of common Sense, by the Tricks of *Legerdemain*, or imposed upon by a blind Veneration for Persons and Things, and
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insensibly confirmed in the most obvious Delusion beyond all Recovery.

IN fine, We have always a particular Fondness for Opinions we have long entertain'd, and never once call'd in Question. The Bulk of Mankind have ever had a Propension to Religious Credulity, and no Distinction among Men, is, and always has been, more general than the Credulous and Designing.

THESE Reflections are not designed to unsettle our Minds, or to create an Uncertainty about the True Religion ; but, on the contrary, to make us sensible that nothing is more imprudent than a rash Belief; and that there is no Way to avoid it, but by furnishing our Minds with the Characters of Truth and Falshood, of Revelation and Imposture, and by a serious Application to the Supreme Instructor, for his particular Illumination and Conduct.

15. THESE Advices are the more necessary, that there are so many various Occasions of Error and Mistake ; so many Causes of a wrong Judgment, both from ourselves and others, that there is no Possibility otherwise, unless it be a rare good Providence, of falling into the right Way of Belief ; so many Requisites of a successful Enquiry after Truth, and all so necessary, that if any one be wanting, we run the utmost Hazard of all the ill Effects of a Religious Delusion.

IF a Man is under any powerful Prejudice, which hangs a Byass on his judging Faculty,

or possess'd with any Passion, which leads him aside in his Reasoning ; if he is sway'd by particular Interest, which he prefers to Truth and Religion ; if he is too lazy to be at sufficient Pains to inform himself, or wants Leisure to proceed with Caution in the Enquiry, so as to be too hasty and precipitate in making the Conclusion, whatever be the Cause of that Precipitation ; in all these Cases, and many others which might be mentioned, a Man is in the utmost Danger of taking the wrong Side of the Question.

FURTHER, How many Impediments arise from the Narrowness and Indisposition of the Mind, which produce the same Effect with Respect to the Judgment, which Tenderness, or any Disease of the Eye, does with Respect to the Eye-sight ? How few have Penetration enough to sound a Question of Difficulty ? Or Capacity to take in all the Ideas which is requisite to form the Conclusion aright ? Or Patience to unravel a perplex'd Argument ?

BUT were our Minds never so well qualify'd for the Discoveries of Truth, what Danger of Imposition arise from the Arts of Sophistry, or the plausible Colours of a fluent Rhetorick ? Let a Person have all the Honesty and Affection to Truth, and all the Judgment and Sagacity which we can well imagine ; nay, let us suppose what never, or at least very seldom happens, that he is free of all the internal Causes of Error, and is possess'd of every other good Quality, yet all of

of these Advantages are not sufficient to produce an absolute Security against Imposture. If the Subject he considers is of a Nature abstruse and metaphysical, and so apt to be perplex'd by too great Subtility and Refinement of Thought, he immediately loses himself in the Argument. Or if he labours under an excessive Fear and Distrust of his own Judgment, or is guilty of too great Veneration for another's, who does not deserve that Confidence; a Person so disposed will be more inclin'd to hearken to the Dictates of Authority, than to the clearest Apprehensions of his own Judgment, and to sacrifice common Sense to a groundless Regard for Persons and Things. In which Case he may be as easily imposed upon, with all his fine Qualities, for the Discovery of Truth, as if he had not a Grain either of Ability or honest Inclination.

So many various Ways there are, in which we, poor Mortals, may either mistake or be misled; and so many Reasons we have to proceed with the utmost Caution, and to be at the greatest Pains, even altho' we have all the requisite Advantages for a free and impartial Enquiry.

16. As for that Indolence and Submission of Mind, which prevents Reflection, and makes Enquiry needless, and to which so many owe all their Christian Belief, nothing can be more unworthy of a reasonable Creature, or the Professor of a Religion which is founded upon Evidence.

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THE same credulous Disposition, (as it has been often observed) which engages Men to be Christians in one Part of the World, would make them to be of any Religion, or of none at all, in another; and if once a Man has acquired an Indifference to the Truth, he will soon arrive at a Disposition to swallow every Religious Cheat which Interest recommends to him.

A Man of this Temper will continue no longer in any Profession of Religion, than he finds his Account by it; or if an unreasonable Prejudice, which Education is apt to inspire, should fix him in a particular Way; 'tis plain there could be nothing of Virtue or real Goodness in that Perseverance; nothing more commendable than in any other Instance of Stiffness or Attachment to an Opinion: Such a Constancy would be the mere Effect of particular Providence, by which the Person came to breathe the Air, first in one particular Spot of the Globe, and to be train'd up under a particular Set of Spiritual Instructors.

17. THIS long Discourse, to show the Obligation of particular Enquiry into Religion, may probably appear to some in a very different View. It may, by Mistake, seem to be rather an Attempt to prove, that either we cannot arrive at Certainty about Religion at all, or, at least, that the Generality of Mankind are incapable of it, than a serious Endeavour to make People sensible of a necessary and important Duty.

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IT cannot indeed be disowned, that the Difficulty, which arises from the Capacity and Circumstances of the illiterate Part of Mankind, is very considerable. For 'tis very certain, that the Majority every where is of this Character; and as plain that People of that Education or Size of Judgment are very ill qualified to judge concerning Matters of Difficulty. Ordinary Mechanicks have neither the Leisure nor Capacity to enter into the Merits of a Cause, or weigh the Force of an Argument. The distinguishing Faculty is in no great Perfection, even in People of higher Pretensions; nay, a Man may make a considerable Figure in Life, who is but very ill appointed for rational Enquiries into Truth and Religion.

BUT suppose Uneducated Christians, and some of a higher Form, may want sufficient Understanding to go thro' all the Steps of a Rational Enquiry, so as to determine the precise Force of every Argument for Religion, and form an entire and regular Proof of its Truth and Certainty; yet it is possible for them to have a general Notion of the Characters of Truth, and an imperfect Sense of the Evidences for Christianity. As there are many plain Arguments for Religion, which People of the lowest Size are able to judge of, these alone afford a sufficient Ground of Rational Assent. And why may not a Man be determined by a partial Evidence, and that with Abundance of Reason, tho' he is not able to

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comprehend the whole Proof? Cannot a Man be certain of the Truth of any Proposition, tho' perhaps he has neither Leisure nor Capacity to consider whatever might be alledged *pro* and *con*? In the ordinary Affairs of Life, we are often under a Necessity of assenting one Way, before we have had a compleat Information, or Time to judge of every Particular in Relation to the Point in Question. Nay it is very much to be doubted, whether we should ever arrive at Certainty about any Thing, if it was not attainable but by learning all that could be advanced on both Sides. If this Sort of Evidence therefore be reckoned sufficient in other Matters, and a competent Ground of Assent, why should we insist upon further Evidence, where Religion is concerned? Is it not sufficient to denominate the Faith of an ignorant Person rational, that it proceeds upon the ordinary Grounds of Persuasion, or such as leave him in no Doubt or Uncertainty about Affairs of ordinary Importance? Or shall he proceed with more Caution, in a Point where his Disbelief may be attended with Danger, than he is accustomed and obliged to use in Matters where it can have no ill Consequence at all?

FURTHER observe, That the Principles upon which the Certainty of Religion relies are very few and easily understood. Whatever Mysteries may be contain'd in Religion, or whatever Judgment and Subtilty of Reason may be required to the Decision of particular Questions relating to it, there is certain-

ly nothing very difficult, or very mysterious in the Proof? And there is this good Reason for it ; namely, that such a Perspicuity of Proof is absolutely necessary to render Religion universally useful ; because, as no Man can be obliged to assent to any Proposition without Evidence, if the Reasons for Religion lay so deep, that none but laborious Minds could get at them, a Revelation of so difficult a Proof could be only calculated for an inconsiderable Number of Men ; that is, for People who had just as little Business, and as much Capacity, as would qualify them to find out the Proof ; and would be really the same as none at all for all the World who are Strangers to Philosophy and the Sciences.

IN order to accommodate Religion to the Genius of every Enquirer, the wise Author has condescended to deal with Men in a very easy Method.

As he intended the Revelation he proposed to Mankind, for the universal Benefit of all who are capable of the least Reflection, he has placed the Evidence of it in Matters of Fact ; a Sort of Proof, which there is no Need of Logick or Philosophy to make intelligible, and which the ordinary Affairs, and necessary Occasions of Life render both easy and familiar to the active and unthinking Part of Mankind.

A Religion founded upon Proofs, so universally intelligible, gives no Interruption to the Industry of the Neccessitous, and lays no impossible

possible Obligation upon Men, either to believe without Evidence, or to understand what their Circumstances render unintelligible.

UPON this Account it has really no Paradox to assert, That the illiterate Part of Mankind may sometimes conceive a truer Notion of Religion, and the Grounds of it, than others whose Learning otherwise entitles them to a greater Accuracy of Judgment.

FOR as the Ignorant may be possessed of certain moral Qualities, which are of great Use in the Conduct of the Judgment, which Men of Letters are not always endued withal; and as the Unlearned are equally capable to perceive the Evidences for Religion with the Learned: And in fine, as the right Determination of the Judgment, concerning Religion, depends, in a great Measure, upon certain moral Dispositions; it is a plain Consequence, that the Advantage for a fair and impartial Judgment, may be often upon the Side of Ignorance, while Learning, in Conjunction with Pride, and some other immoral Hinderance of free Enquiry, may be of little other Use to a Man, than to confirm him in an unreasonable Prejudice, or furnish him with Weapons against the True Religion.

THE Prejudices which arise from Passion and vicious Affection, give their own particular Colour to all the Objects of Thought, and very often bend the judging Faculty so far one Way, as to make the clearest Arguments for the Truth of any Proposition appear in the

the View of an Objection against it. Now all Men, learned or unlearned, are liable to this Frailty of Judgment, and the Influence of Prepossession; and therefore, Learning and good Sense are not always a Protection against the ill Consequences and Effects of such Influence.

FOR tho' the People who have these Advantages must certainly be better qualified to determine the just Force of an Argument, and to distinguish between Truth and the Appearances of it, than those who want them; yet as it is ordinarily in every Man's Power, whether he shall consider a Matter seriously or not; and whether he will allow the Reasons for Religion, a fair and impartial Hearing: And as the right Conclusion necessarily depends upon a deliberate Examination of the Promises; so Experience shows that every Man's present Temper and Affections determine him, both as to the Application of his Thoughts to a Subject, and the Degrees of Attention he bestows upon it.

HENCE it happens by Consequence, that we readily believe what we wish to be true, and are very hardly persuaded of the Truth of any Thing, when the Persuasion is contrary to a present Interest.

NOW, altho' it can never be inconsistent with a Man's real Advantage, to believe that there is such a Thing as Religion, yet the present State of his Affections, and the imaginary Interest which arises from the Indulgence of them,

them, may easily create in him a very great Unwillingness to be persuaded: And therefore to believe the Gospel will be a much greater Difficulty to a Person of Learning, under these untowardly Circumstances, than it is to another, whose Inclinations and plain Sense furnish him with no Objection against the Truth of Religion.

By this Means it may happen, that an honest Mind, without Learning or Prejudice, without any unreasonable Fondness and Attachment to a particular Vice, may be in a better Condition to know the true Grounds of Religion, and so more ready to be convinced by that Knowledge, than another to whom Literature and Pride make the Simplicity of Truth appear contemptible, or an invincible Love of sensual Pleasure, gives an Air of Harshness and Severity to the stricter Morals of the Gospel-institution.

THIS different Disposition in Men for Receiving the Truth, our blessed Saviour intimates in that Address to his Father, *Matth. xi. 25. I thank thee, O Father, because thou has hidden these Things from the Wise and Prudent, and revealed them unto Babes*; where it is probable our Saviour no more understood by Babes, Men so absolutely ignorant, that they had no Relish for Truth, or incapable to discern it from Falshood, than by wise Men, such as really deserved that Character. By the first it appears, such Men were understood, who being free from Prejudice, Self-Opinion, and

and other Causes of a wrong Judgment, were in a proper Disposition to receive the Truth when it was proposed to them; and by wise Men, those who were so conceited of their own Knowledge, as to reject every Opinion which did not suit with it. As these opposite Qualities would very naturally produce as contrary Effects, it was nothing more unaccountable, that the Scribes and Pharisees should reject our Saviour's Pretensions, and the clearest Evidence of Miracles, than that the Disciples should be convinced by it, and acknowledge him as the *Messiah*: For altho' the *Jewish* Doctors must have certainly understood what were the true Characters of that illustrious Person, better than the simple People, and could apply the ancient Predictions with more Propriety, than any Fisherman uninspired could pretend to do, yet it is very plain, that these *Rabbies* had a particular Interest of their own, as well as certain very bad Qualities, which indisposed them to acknowledge the Character and Pretensions of JESUS CHRIST.

UPON the whole, it is not to be doubted that a Man may be very reasonably persuaded of the Truth of Religion, who yet may be unable to make the Grounds of that Persuasion intelligible to others. A Man may be a very rational and sincere Believer, who is not in a Condition to dispute and wrangle for the Faith, or to answer the Objections which a subtile disputacious Wit may make against it. In fine, Probity and ordinary Sense may be a better

better Judge of Religion, than Learning enslaved to Prejudice and vicious Affection.

AFTER all, the Belief of Christianity necessarily supposes some Degree of Knowledge, and must be founded upon Evidence. To be persuaded of a Divine Revelation, for we know not what Reason, can be nothing different from Prejudice; the only ordinary Ground of Religious Belief, being a clear Perception of the Evidences which are brought for the Truth and Certainty of Religion.

AND the proper Means to produce this Conviction, can be no other than a fair Proposal of these Evidences, and a proper Address to the Understanding of Men. This is the Method of dealing with rational Creatures, who are not to be led by meer Passion, or a blind irrational Force. And altho' the most convincing Arguments in the World, are perhaps insufficient to make a Believer, without a Divine Assistance, yet that Illumination is not to be expected in any other Way, than the ordinary Method of Conviction; and this ordinary Method must be something else than Inspiration, or the warm Touches of Passion and Desire. The *first* is indeed a Privilege which no Body can, at this Age of Christianity, pretend to; and the *last* is a fleeting, uncertain Effect upon the Mind, with which the worst of Men may be very often affected, of no real Continuance, and therefore very insufficient to be either a Ground of Belief or a steady Principle of Action.

NOTHING but a Sense of Truth, or an Opinion of real Existence, can have any lasting Influence upon the Mind, or produce any considerable Effect in the Change or Reformation of the Life and Practice.

WE can read the most beautiful Description of an *Elysium*, or imaginary Paradise, without any other Concern than what is naturally produced by the Justness of Sentiment, or the Charms of Language; altho' the Representation was wrought by the Fancy of *Virgil*, or the Eloquence of *Plato*, it would no otherwise affect us, if we knew all to be a Fiction, than any other Performance, which could bear the Test of Criticism, or gratify a refin'd Taste. We could not make any Reflection, which would furnish us with the least Glimpse of Hope, or the faintest Desire of a future Happiness. Was the Scene of Bliss laid by some Modern Philosopher, in a planetary World: Was *Venus* or *Mercury* made the Seat of the happy, and *Huygens*, or one as ingenious, the Author of the Description, the Pleasure we could derive from such a Philosophical Amusement, would be nothing so considerable as the Satisfaction we receive from the Prospect of a certain, tho' very inconsiderable Advantage. In the same Manner the terrible Accounts of a future Punishment, contained in the Gospel, must create the most dismal Fears and Melancholy to a Person, who believes that the Worm which never dies, and the Fire which shall not be quenched, stand for some Punishment which will

will certainly happen, while the imaginary Torments of *Tantalus* or *Ixion* give him no Manner of Apprehension, that he shall ever suffer such a terrible Fate.

THE Promises and Threatnings of the Christian Religion, with respect to a future Happiness or Misery, are certainly very proper to work upon our Hopes and Fears, and so are wisely calculated to create in us the utmost Concern to be good; seeing the Practice of Virtue and Religion is represented as the only Means of obtaining a future Bliss, and avoiding an intolerable Punishment: But the entire Efficacy of these Motives, to excite us to a virtuous Behaviour, depends upon their Credibility; and Men will be only moved by such Considerations, while they believe they are Parts of a Divine Revelation, and the Sanctions of the Supreme Lawgiver, who is able to save and destroy.

IN order therefore to preserve intire this Moral Influence upon the Mind and Practice, it is necessary we be settled in the Belief of a Divine Revelation, as it is contained in the Gospel. The ordinary Means of acquiring that Persuasion, is a serious Enquiry into these Characters of Truth and Inspiration, which the sacred Writings must necessarily bear, and by which they are evidently distinguished from every other pretended Revelation.

TILL we are thoroughly persuaded of this Difference between the Religion of JESUS and every Impostor, the admirable Precepts

of Christianity which are of so much Use in the right Conduct of our Life and Actions, will appear to be of no greater Force or Obligation, than the ordinary Maxims of Prudence, or those Rules of Behaviour which every Man's Reason is of itself sufficient to find out or approve.




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DISCOURSE II.

On the Right of Private Judgment.

I.  WAS a Complaint against the Christian Religion, as old and malicious as *Celsus* the Philosopher, that Christians required People to believe without Evidence, and so discouraged a free and impartial Enquiry.

How meer a Cavil it was, we may judge by the Writings of the ancient Apologists, as well

The Intention of this Discourse is meerly to vindicate the Right of every Christian to judge for himself, in Opposition to those Pretensions to Church Authority, which are inconsistent with it, and not to enter into the Merits of the Question, about the Lawfulness of requiring Subscription to Creeds and Confessions of Faith. Whatever Regard may be supposed

well as the many learned Defences of Religion against modern Unbelievers. These afford a Demonstration, that as the primitive Christians had no secret Suspicion, that Religion was indefensible; so their Successors have had no Interest to abridge People of any reasonable Liberty, in making Objections to it. As they apprehended no Danger from a free Examination, so their ordinary Appeals to Reason and common Sense, is an Argument that Religion had stood the Trial of their own.

'Tis true the Professors of Christianity have all along restricted themselves in the Use of this Liberty, and have paid a Deference to Revelation, in Matters of Doctrine clearly vouched by it; they have been ready to receive any Opinion as true, however difficult to understand, upon the single Foot of Divine Authority, without insisting upon further Evidence, as sensible that the Testimony of an inspired infallible Writer, was an Evidence for the Truth of any Fact or Doctrine, equivalent to Demonstration, or Mathematical Proof; but then this Submission of Judgment always supposed

supposed to be due to such humane Compositions, all Protestants are agreed that the Scriptures are a sufficient, and the only Rule of Faith; and that as no Man is so happy as to be infallible, so no Man can pretend to be Lord over the Conscience of another.

In order to illustrate these important Truths, I have push'd the Argument as far as it will go, without pretending to decide how far humane Authority may require a Subscription to certain approv'd Systems, or may be comply'd with for the Sake of Order.

supposed a previous Satisfaction as to the Truth of the Christian Revelation; for as the particular Assent to any Fact or Doctrine, contained in the Sacred Writings, depended upon, and was to be resolved into the general Evidences of the Infallibility and Inspiration of the Composers; so it was a mere Result of that Evidence, and could not possibly rise higher than the Cause which produced it.

THE Method therefore in which the first Profelytes to Christian Religion seem to have proceeded, was first to examine the Proofs for that Revelation, and then their Belief of its particular Doctrines must be determined, according to the Result of that Enquiry. If the Evidences of our Saviour's Religion entirely convinced them, they must have an undoubted Persuasion, that every particular Fact or Doctrine was certainly true. A probable Evidence, for the Truth of Christianity, could only produce a probable Assent to Matters which depended merely upon that Authority; and an entire Ignorance of the Proofs of that Religion could not imply an impossible Obligation to believe it. A Person who had never been either an Eye-witness to the miraculous Confirmation of the Gospel by our Saviour and his Apostles, or received an authentick Account of those Miracles from others, could form no Judgment of a Religion while he was ignorant of those Proofs on which the Truth and Certainty of it depended. If he had by Chance heard of JESUS CHRIST, and the New Religion he came to establish,
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he must indeed be obliged to enquire further about it, and to use the proper Means of Information : But sure he could be under no Obligation to surrender his Judgment immediately to an uncertain Report, or to acknowledge our Saviour to be the *Messiah*, before he had examin'd his Pretensions to that Character ; No, Such a Person would have been obliged in Reason to suspend his Judgment, till such Time as he had obtain'd a reasonable Satisfaction, either by the ordinary Means of Conviction, or the Favour of an immediate Revelation.

IF such a Person, instead of laying himself open to the Means of Instruction, and going on in the humble Method of Enquiry, had been so rash, as immediately to credit a suspicious Account of our Saviour's Doctrine and Miracles ; such a sudden and unaccountable Persuasion might well pass for the Effect of a warm *Enthusiasm*, or vain Credulity, but could not have any Pretence to a rational Belief. Such a Man might possibly bring himself to credit every Word of the Gospel, but with as little Reason, as a Follower of *Mahomet* believes the Dreams of the *Alcoran* ; nor could he, with all his Confidence, persuade any other, who was not as far gone in Credulity and *Enthusiasm* as himself. Nothing less than the Evidence of unquestionable Miracles could justify such a rash Belief ; and these Miracles must be repeated in the View of the World, to convince People,

who could have no better Instructor in the Christian Religion.

2. HAD the Apostles and first Preachers of the Gospel been chargeable with a Credulity so preposterous? Had they laid an unreasonable Command upon every Body to receive their Instructions, without asking Questions, or requiring Evidence, their Honesty or Understanding would have been very justly suspected? A Religion, which made fair Examination a Crime, would have abundantly diverted the World, without making one Profelyte. A Foundation had been laid by so odd an Institution for endless Credulity, or eternal Scepticism. For if Men were to be allowed the Use of their Reason and judging Faculties at all, it must be in a Matter of such vast Consequence, where a Mistake would be so dangerous. In a Word, Either a Man must believe every groundless Pretence to Revelation, or none at all, banish all Thoughts of Religion, or entertain every Religious Cheat.

3. THERE is nothing in the sacred Writings to encourage either a Neglect to cultivate and improve our own Understanding, or a mean and lazy Submission to the Judgment of others. There is no Commission there to authorize one Part of Mankind to judge for the rest; no Precept or Example that can be any Inducement to receive our Opinions merely upon Authority, or that can yield us any Security against the Event, if we do; on

the contrary, both the Reason of Things, and the repeated Cautions of holy Writ, invite us to look about us, and to see that we be not imposed upon.

THE *Jewish* Priests under the Old Testament had a better Title to Submission from the Laity, than any modern Pretenders to Authority: Besides, the Character of authorized Interpreters of God's Law, they were distinguished from the Lay-*Jews* by extraordinary Privileges and Marks of Favour: But in Spight of these Distinctions, the People retained an entire Right of judging for themselves. For as every *Israelite* had by the Divine Appointment publick Occasions of hearing his Duty in a Language he understood, every Man was obliged to make the best Use of the Law at Home; Privileges which had been very insignificant, if he had been always to be determined by the Judgment of a *Levite*. But indeed, how little that Office consisted in the Decision of Questions, or the authoritative Instruction of the Ignorant, we may judge by the continual Attendance they were bound to give to the Temple-Service, and their daily Labour in the Execution of Ritual Laws.

THE *Jews* not only interpreted the Laws of God for themselves, with the Assistance of the Priests, but it would seem were likewise allowed to judge of every Pretence to Prophecy and Revelation; for if this had been the peculiar Province of the Priesthood, why

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were the Characteristicks of a true and false laid down in those Books, to which every *Israelite* had Access? What could the frequent Cautions against Imposture signify, or the Circumspection the People were required to use, before they acknowledged a Prophet, or the Threats pronounced against those who suffer'd themselves to be seduced : I say, what could all these Precautions import, unless that every Man's Pretensions to Prophecy and Inspiration was to be to every particular *Jew*, what his own private Judgment, after an impartial Trial represented them, and not what the Verdict of a particular Priest, or an Assembly of *Levites* might determine upon the Question.

THIS Liberty of Judgment, as it is founded in Nature, and authorized by the *Jewish* Laws, was left entire by the Author of the Christian Religion.

OUR Blessed Saviour came to establish a new Institution, and consequently to abrogate the *Mosaick* Law and Ceremonies. As these had all the Authority, which a continued Series of miraculous Events could give any Religion, it was absolutely necessary, that his Divine Mission should be proved by the most ample Credentials, that so the invidious Pretensions to destroy the *Jewish* Religion, might be sufficiently supported, and the Authority, which introduced a new Form of Religion, might be at least equal to that which had establish'd the old.

OUR Saviour therefore was so far from requiring People to take it upon his Word that he was the *Messiah*, that he proved his Mission by the most unquestionable Miracles, and by all the Marks of Authority, which the Law of *Moses*, and the Writings of the Prophets had laid down for the Trial of his Pretensions. The Miracles he wrought were so many Appeals to the Reason and Eye-sight of every *Israelite*; and, if we may believe the Evangelick Writers, far surpassed in their Nature and Number, all the Performances of that Kind, by which any of the Prophets, or even their Law-giver had distinguish'd himself.

AND 'tis plain no *Jew* could acknowledge our Saviour as the *Messiah* upon lesser Evidence, without an unjustifiable Credulity, and a Want of Respect to that Law and Religion, which our Saviour came to abrogate.

THAT every Person might have all reasonable Satisfaction, our Saviour frequently appeals to the Works which the Father had given him to finish, and frankly acknowledges, that they were not obliged to credit his mere Pretension. *If I bear Witness of my self, my Witness is not true*, John 5, 31, and 37. ver. of the 10th Chap. *If I do not the Work of my Father, believe me not; but if I do, tho' you believe not me, believe the Work.* Nay, he seems to allow the utmost Indulgence to their Caution, by supposing their Unbelief had been excusable, if he had not confirmed his Doctrine and Authority, by Works of so great Power,

as no Prophet had ever performed. Plain Arguments, that as our Lord had no Design to serve by the Weakness and Credulity of Men; so he was not afraid to submit his Doctrine, and the Miracles which were wrought in Proof of his Mission, to the severest Examination.

THE Apostles and first Preachers of the Gospel followed their Master's Example in this fair Way of Proceeding. As they neither knew nor suspected any Cheat, they were willing every Body should be at the Pains of an impartial Enquiry. While they gave the Testimony of Eye-witnesses to our Saviour's Miracles, they declared to all the World, how they came to be so much assured of his Resurrection; namely, by conversing with him afterwards for a considerable Time, and by seeing him ascend into Heaven; and to confirm their Account, they performed greater Miracles themselves, than any they ascrib'd to their Master.

THEY convinced the *Jews* by their own Notions; and from the Authority of such Writings as they acknowledged, they encouraged People to compare their Doctrine with ancient Predictions, and gave a very favourable Character of those, who were so inquisitive, as knowing that a fair Trial could do them no Harm.

WHEN the Apostles preached to the *Gentiles*, they addressed them with Arguments proper to convince them, instead of quoting the

the Prophets, whole Authority they did not own ; they laid the Stress of their Cause upon such Evidence, as every Heathen was able to judge of, arguing with them either from common received Principles, or from such Matters of Fact, into which they had sufficient Opportunity to enquire. In this Manner the Apostles took Care to suit the Proofs of their Doctrines to People of every Character and Capacity ; and tho' they did not convince an interested *Rabbi*, or a Sceptical *Sadducee*, by an irresistible Evidence, they afforded both, as well as those who were persuaded, sufficient Grounds to believe.

To the Force of this Evidence, so well adapted to the different Circumstances of Men, we may not improperly ascribe the numerous Conversions of the *Jews* and *Gentiles* to the Christian Faith ; whereas, Had the first Teachers of that Religion either neglected to reason, or made Use of Arguments which were not proper to convince ; had they done no more than exhort People to believe, and, in a Warmth of Zeal, addressed themselves only to the Passion and Fancy of Men ; Tho' such a Method might possibly have wrought upon some of the more Unthinking, and would certainly have saved themselves Abundance of Pains ; yet it is certain, that in this Way of Conversion, the credulous and ignorant Part of the Audience would have been the only Profelytes.

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OR, if any among the simple People had been gain'd over by a meer Pathetick Address, it is plain they had been as easily wrought upon by the next Attempt of the same Kind. To prevent the Success of such Imposture, we find the Apostles every where exhort People to try all Things, and to hold fast that which is good, and caution them not to believe every Spirit, but to try the Spirits, whether they are of God, and that for an unexceptionable Reason, to which Seventeen hundred Years have added a great Weight, that many false Prophets had gone out into the World.

So far 'tis evident, that there is no Ground from the sacred Writings to believe without Evidence, no Warrant for resigning a Man's Understanding to the Spiritual Direction of any particular Body of Men.

HAD the Author of the Christian Religion invested some Men, with an Authority to dictate to the rest of Mankind; as Submission to their Judgment had been upon this Supposition every Christian's Duty, no doubt we should have had them particularly described in the New Testament, their Character had been represented, so as to leave us in no Uncertainty about them, every honest Man who reads the Bible, must learn enough to know whose infallible Instruction he must depend upon, instead of his own Pains and Enquiry, and who was the only authentick Teacher of Religion: For surely such extraordinary Gifts
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and Authority had been bestowed to no Purpose, if the Possessors were not sufficiently distinguished from ordinary fallible Men.

THE Apostles indeed were endued with a Spirit from Heaven, and their Inspiration was confirmed by evident Miracles ; but these were Credentials which entitled them to a Regard, which no modern Doctor can pretend to deserve, unless he could prove his Divine Mission and Authority in the same Way.

IT is no unreasonable Conjecture that the Apostles themselves were tied down to the Instructions they had received, and therefore had no Right to make new Articles of Faith. What they as the infallible Interpreters of the Christian Laws and Doctrine have left upon Record, all Christians receive with Veneration, and all reckon themselves obliged to believe and obey ; but we must not extend the Obligation so far, as to place modern Teachers upon a Level with the ancient Apostles ; we owe no Submission to their Judgment, which the Reason and Evidence of Things does not require. Every particular Christian is obliged to know the Reasons for his Religion, every private Man is bound, and therefore must be able to judge what is the Rule and Standard of his Faith, and what is the genuine Sense of it ; and for this good Reason there can be no such Thing, as an Authority in some to prescribe what others ought to believe, which would be perfectly inconsistent with the Obligation,

gation, which every Man is under to judge for himself.

THAT no Man now is vested with the Authority of a Spiritual Dictator, is a Truth which all Protestants must, tho' some are very unwilling to acknowledge. The Absurdity of such a Pretence is so immediately obvious, that no Body has the Assurance to make it in plain and direct Manner. But a Right to dictate is too valuable a Privilege to be easily parted with, and therefore if the Claim to it is resign'd with Regrete, the Pretension is however too frequently maintained in another Form.

A Man who has Modesty enough to decline the Honour of an absolute Submission to his single Judgment, may however be well enough pleased with the Thought of that Reward, to which his Reading and Knowledge of Antiquity entitles him. And therefore tho' the Doctor, with a very commendable Self-denial, assures every Body, that he does not pretend to be above Mistake himself; yet he makes no Scruple to set up as the only Interpreter of certain Writings, which contain an infallible Account of Christian Doctrine. The Greek and Latin Fathers are the Men to whom Orthodox Christians are obliged to submit their Judgment; we must learn from their Commentaries and Homilies what is the true Sense of the Apostles. But this is a Fountain of Christian Knowledge, which is lock'd up to the ignorant Layman, and which no Body

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has Access to, but either the learned Clerk or a few in the Parish ; and therefore the People must be eternally incapable of judging for themselves, what is right or wrong, true or false in Religion ; if all the Doctrines of it, and the right Explication of them can only be acquired by reading such Authors, which a Man of Letters and Study can only understand.

IN order to vindicate the Right of private Judgment, it will be therefore proper to show, by some Remarks upon the Writings of Christian Antiquity, that these are not to be depended upon, as the Deciders of Religious Controversy ; and that the Learned, with all their Reading and Knowledge of ancient Writers, are really as unable, meerly in the Strength of these Advantages, as the Ignorant are without them, to determine what are the true Doctrines of the Christian Religion.

I. CHRISTIANS certainly owe a very great Veneration to the genuine Productions of Christian Antiquity ; these Writings being composed by Men of eminent Probity and Abilities, who had many Advantages to understand the sacred Books, which modern Writers cannot pretend to. As the Primitive Fathers received many Notices from Apostolick Tradition, which enlightened their Minds, and animated their Zeal ; we may be sure, that Men who died Martyrs for a Religion, which they defended with so much good Sense, must be very zealous for the Purity of our Saviour's Doct-

Doctrine, as well as some of the best Examples of a good Life.

BUT we must not suffer our selves to be carried away by a blind Veneration, for great Names, as if the Primitive Writings were free from all Error or Mistake, or could infallibly lead us into a right Notion of Christian Doctrine.

ONE would not be apt to imagine, that the Spirit of Infallibility survived the Apostles, who considers the many Distractions in Opinion and Practice, which afterwards ravaged the Christian Church, in its earliest and purest State, and the many monstrous Heresies which sprung one out of another, and every where spread their Infection.

IT can be no Injury to Religion to confess the Truth after *Eusebius* †, who from an old Historian informs us, how early and prevalent Errors and Innovations were in the Infancy of the Church. As many undertook to write Memoirs of our Saviour's Life, who were not sufficiently instructed as to Matters of Fact, the World was soon oppressed by a Multitude of false or imperfect Accounts of it; many Writings were composed under the venerable Names of Apostles and eminent Men, several of which were received with a Veneration which they did not deserve; by which Means the first Christians found a Difficulty to settle the Number of Books, which were the infal-

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† Euseb. Hist. Lib. 3. cap. 26.

lible Issue of the Apostles and inspired Men, and to distinguish them from other less valuable Compolures.

BUT as Truth sooner or later triumphs over Error and Forgery, at last after a due Examination of the different Pretensions, the Number of Canonical Writings was settled, by the Authority of the Council of *Laodicea* in the 367. This Declaration however was not universally approved, seeing the Synod of *Carthage* in the Year 397, added to the Canon, or the Catalogue of Books to be read in Church, the *Maſcabees*, *Judith*, *Tobit*, *Ecclesiasticus*, and the *Book of Wisdom*, as well as the *Apocalypse*. *Athanasius* too, we find by a Mistake, reckons the third Book of *Eſdras* among the Canonical or inspired Writings, and several of the Ancients, not only particular Persons, but whole Churches, rejected some one or other of the sacred Books, or paid an undue Regard to meer human Writings. These good Men, either from a Credulity which disposed them to approve what made for their Cause, or the Want of Opportunity to learn what Books were genuine, or what were spurious, were frequently led into Mistakes of this Importance, and therefore often made References to Books, which are now confessed to be spurious, as well as rejected the just Authority of inspired Writings.

IT must be own'd, that as the Hereticks rejected the best Part of those Books, which the Orthodox received, and endeavoured to adul:

adulterate the genuine Writings of the Apostles, so the Orthodox themselves were not perfectly agreed as to the Number of the Canonical Books, till a long Time after the authentic Decisions, which had been made at *Laodicea* and *Carthage* concerning the Canon.

THESE Remarks show; that as the Primitive Fathers and Churches did not only differ about Matters of Ceremony or Discipline, or Opinions of lesser Consequence, but were likewise divided in their Judgment, about those Matters of Fact, which were indeed of great Concernment to the Christian Church; and therefore we cannot easily allow them all that Authority, which is necessary to make their Writings decisive in Points of Difficulty.

2. BUT whatever be the Authority of ancient Writers, it is certain that we are not able to form any certain Judgment concerning the Sentiments of the three first, that is, the purest Ages of Christianity, by those few Writings which are come to our Hands. It is very much to be regreted, that many Books of this Antiquity have been lost, either by the Injury of Time, or the Malice of Adversaries, and those which were certainly writ within that Period, are for many Reasons insufficient to give us any certain Account of Christian Doctrine. As they are composed, many of them with a very different Design, either meerly to vindicate the Christians from the Calumnies of Heathens and Jews, or to expose the Absurdity of *Pagan* Idolatry, or to confute the mon-

monstrous Conceits of Hereticks and false Christians.

3. THOSE who are versed in ancient Writings know, that 'tis a very difficult Task to distinguish the genuine from the spurious Productions of Antiquity. The vast Number of Forgeries, which Interest or pious Fraud have induced Men to make, and the many Books which have been falsely ascrib'd to the ancient Fathers, in Consequence of such Imposture, make so much Work for Criticism, that Men ordinarily learned, much more the Bulk of Christians, are incapable to pronounce any certain Judgment in a thousand Cases, what is, or what is not a genuine Piece. The Labour and Sagacity of some have indeed made many and strange Discoveries of this Kind ; and how many more were we capable to make, if we either knew the Stile of particular Writers better, or the History of former Ages? But who can pretend to be Master of that Penetration, that through Knowledge of Antiquity, or Skill in Ecclesiastick History, as is necessary to separate all the Dross from the Gold, all the genuine from the spurious Writings of the Fathers ; And how can a Man determine the just Authority of any particular Treatise, or any pretended Decision of an ancient Council, unless he can make a certain Judgment, whether it is genuine or not.

A modest Man, whatever his Learning be, would be afraid to pass a Sentence upon a suspected Father, who considers that *Jerome*, the greatest

greatest Critick of Antiquity, delivers, as legitimate, the Epistles, which were pretended to have passed between *Seneca* and *St. Paul* ; and that *Clemens Alexandrinus*, the most learned and polite of all the Fathers, as *Dallee* observes, was so often imposed upon by Apocryphal Writings, falsely ascribed to the Apostles.

“ IN all the Disputes (says a very learned Person) about the Images in Churches, and in the Differences betwixt the *Greek* and *Latin Churches*, and indeed in the most Part of all other Ecclesiastical Contentions, you will find nothing more frequent than the mutual Reproaches of Forgery, which the several Parties cast at each other, and of some pious Fraud in Defence of their own Cause.”

EVERY Body knows, who is the least acquainted with Church-History, what Knaveries of this Kind have been committed, or at least connived at ; How many Letters and Acts of Council have been either forged or falsify'd to support the Pretensions of ambitious Clergymen ? And how many Cheats might have been used, whereof we at this Distance of Time can have no Notice, to make the present Doctrine of a corrupt Church appear agreeable to those Writings, from which all Christians in all Ages have sought Countenance and Protection ?

4. BESIDES the Forgery of entire Pieces, it has been probably alledged, that the Works
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of primitive Writers might have been very much corrupted either by Negligence or Fraud, with a pious or malicious Design, by transposing Sentences, or suppressing a Part, or by spurious Additions, and several other little Tricks, which have been commonly used in Defence of a bad, and sometimes for the Sake of a good Cause, so as to produce an entire Alteration of the Sense, and make the Author express the quite contrary to what he really intended.

WHAT Liberties of this Kind, some ancient Writers of great Character have used with the Works of *Origen* and *Eusebius*, is very well known. From which Instance we may probably infer, what meaner Authors were capable of; nay 'tis certain many actually were guilty in the same Way both ancient and modern; as we may learn from *Dallee*, who has made it appear, that not only the Writings of the Fathers and Acts of Councils have exceedingly suffered by these Falsifications, but likewise that the Liturgies of the Church, which seem to be most safe from such treacherous Attempts, have had the same Fate.

IN fine, The Papists have made such Havock of the true and genuine Sense of Antiquity, have so often made the venerable Fathers speak their own Sense, or struck them dumb when they spoke against them; that we have Reason to doubt, whether any ancient Writing has altogether escaped their Barbarity, so as to be transmitted down to
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Posterity in its genuine Form, by these everlasting Persecutors of Books and Men.

5. BUT let us suppose that the Books, which pass current under the Name of the Fathers, were all of a known and certain Character; and let us further suppose, that these Writings had suffered no material Change, either by Negligence or design'd Corruption, what would these Suppositions signify, unless the Sense of these Authors was clear to the few, who have Leisure or Capacity to peruse them. How unfit are Books to decide Controversy, or to lead us into Truth, if they are writ in a gloomy and perplex'd Stile, embarrass'd by a Flourish of Words, or clouded by Metaphors and Allusions, which Moderns cannot pretend to understand.

THAT this is a true Character of some of the undoubted Records of Antiquity, it would not be hard to show by some of the best Authorities.

EVERY judicious Reader, who looks into Ecclesiastical Authors, may perceive the Truth of this Remark, as well as account for the Reasons of so great Obscurity in the Writings of the Fathers. These good Men were not all of them sufficiently versed, either in the Study of Words, or the Knowledge of Things, as to be able to express themselves with sufficient Perspicuity; not to say that they were destitute of those Helps of right Reasoning, which Moderns are provided withal. In short, As they often talk by the By upon certain Points of Divinity, we cannot

not expect from cursory Notices, any distinct or satisfactory Account of them ; their Sense by this Means is frequently suspended by the Ambiguity of undefin'd Terms ; and the Expressions they use are capable of no fix'd and determinate Meaning, being either in the Time of the Writer of a very different Signification, or since understood in a Sense perfectly different.

FROM these Causes of Obscurity in ancient Authors it frequently happens, that nothing is more uncertain, or the Subject of more Contention, than what is their true Meaning. Frequent Appeals are made to their Judgment, with no other Effect than to multiply Differences, and perpetuate them. Men are sent from the Scripture to seek their true Sense in a Commentary infinitely more difficult ; and the Rule of Decision is frequently more obscure and unintelligible than the Matter in Question. Hence it is, that after all the Wrangling and Splutter, which the Learned have kept up about ancient Opinions or Practice, they are never the nearer to Certainty or Agreement : On the contrary, Protestants and Papists in their Contentions together have so often either tortured the Sense of plain Words, or bewilder'd themselves in a Pursuit of an uncertain Meaning, that our Enquiries about the genuine Sense of Antiquity, seem to be better calculated to entertain a Sceptical Mind, and an eternal Itch

of Doubting, than to determine any one Religious Controversy.

6. LET us suppose that a Man of great Leisure and Patience, with an infinite Pains, has acquired a sufficient Skill in the learned Languages, so as to read a *Greek* and *Latin* Father, without the Help of a Commentary. Let us imagine that he can dispel all the Clouds which darken the Sense of an old Author, and can trace his Meaning, thro' a Labyrinth of barbarous Language and confused Reasoning. What a poor Reward would it be of all his learned Industry, that he can be sure of the literal Signification of Words, if he is in the mean Time ignorant of the real Sentiments of the Author? Or can he know what these are, if he has thought fit to give the Reader only the Judgment of another, or disguise his own, if he talks either without a due Regard to Truth, or without a Design to be understood?

IT is certain, and allowed by the best Critics, that some of the ancient Commentaries upon the Bible, as particularly those of *Origen* and *Jerome*, do not contain merely their own Opinion, but a Collection or Rhapsody of Thoughts from various Authors, and some of these not of the best Character; How shall the Reader distinguish here, between the Conceit of a Heretick and injudicious Person, from the Judgment of a learned Father?

THAT the primitive Writers were generally Persons of singular Integrity is very certain;

tain; however it cannot be denied, that the Liberty of making a little bold with the Truth, in order to serve the Cause of Religion, was not a Practice so universally condemn'd, but that some Persons of Piety and Virtue otherwise, were guilty of it. Whatever Bounds a learned Father might prescribe to his Imagination, in a grave Commentary or Philosophical Discourse, we find that in a Discourse to the People he can indulge his Fancy, and can give into such Strains of Rhetorick, either with a View to please or work upon the Passions of the Audience, as are scarcely consistent with Sincerity, and must be interpreted with many Grains of Allowance.

IN a Word, The scurvy Trick of Lying for the Truth was too early, and alas a too general Practice.

IN all Exaggerations of this Kind, if a Man is a little too easy to believe, or interprets Words according to a strict Propriety, he must be undoubtedly imposed upon.

7. BUT suppose a Reader of Ecclesiastical Books should not only by uncommon Sagacity and Abilities discover a latent Sense, but likewise be absolutely sure, that the Words of the Author express his real Sentiments; all that he could learn by this Means, would be only the Judgment of a particular Writer; for what Assurance can he have from thence, that other cotemporary Writers of greater Learning and Abilities, or other Persons of equal Authority,

thority, who never were Authors, or whose Writings have not come to our Hands, were not of a different Judgment as to the Matter in Question ; what Connexion has the Opinion of one Father with that of another ? The Sentiments of one individual Person with the Belief of a whole Church, or the Sense of a single Church, with the Faith of the whole collective Body of Christians dispersed thro' the whole World, or the Universal Belief of all Christian Churches in one particular Age, with the Belief of all the Churches of the World, at another Age or Period ?

CHRISTIANS in every Age have been liable to the same Diversity of Opinion ; they have all fram'd a different Judgment of Matters, which were either doubtful or not essential Parts of Religion. Nor can we imagine, that a great Number of Men, of a different Size and Complexion of Mind, diversify'd by Education, and living at a different Time, should all consent in the same Belief, without supposing that such Agreement was the Effect of a constant and miraculous Illumination ; seeing we cannot imagine any such Agreement and Unanimity even in a single Church without the same extraordinary Cause.

BUT if all the primitive Writers of a good Character were favoured with such extraordinary Assistance ; how can we reconcile such a Supposition, with the endless Disputes of good Men about Matters of little Moment, and the dif-

different Judgment they have sometimes made concerning Points of very great Importance?

MAY not the wisest Man have some particular Whim or Conceit, and wander from the Road of Truth in a private Bypath of his own? May not an inconsiderate Zeal, or a warm Enthusiastick Fancy transport half a Dozen or half a Score of good Men, as wise as any in a particular Church to an Excess, which is condemned by all the sober Part of the Society? And may not these zealous Persons from a Forwardness of Temper, take up the Pen to inform Posterity, while the wiser Adversaries being sensible of the small Importance of the Point in Debate, may neglect to write upon the Subject?

IT would be a very rash Judgment to conclude from the Sentence of *Ignatius*, that those who fasted upon the Lord's Day were the Murderers of Christ, that every Christian of *Smyrna* or *Philadelphia*, or every Member of the Catholick Church, agreed with him in that odd and uncharitable Fancy; or to collect from the particular Opinion of St. *Austin*, that every Infant was damned who did not partake of the *Eucharist*; or that all the Christians of the Fourth Century worshipped the Relicks of departed Saints, and contended for so Superstitious a Practice, meerly because a Person so considerable as St. *Jerome* fell into that Extravagance.

BUT we may carry the Argument farther and affirm, that the general Agreement of Chri-

Christian Churches in any particular Usage or Opinion, is no Proof either of an universal Consent, or a Divine Original. The Churches of *Asia*, as every Body knows, differed from all other Christians, as to the Observance of *Easter*; Fasting upon *Saturday* was used by the Church of *Rome*, and condemned by all the World besides; the Expectation of a *Millennium* was generally entertained by the primitive Fathers; and no Body doubts, that some of the best and most primitive Christians had very singular and erroneous Notions about the State of departed Souls; every Notion or Practice, which a particular Writer or Church was fond of, was immediately father'd upon the Apostles, and derived from their Authority, so that almost in every Debate of any Consequence, nothing was more common then to alledge apostolick Tradition on both Sides of the Question.

ONE would be apt to think, that altho' the Judgment of a particular Writer, or the received Custom or Sentiment of a particular Church, or the general Consent of Churches in any Practice or Opinion of lesser Consequence, might not prove that the Agreement was universal or derived by a Tradition from the Apostles, yet the Definition of a primitive Council, concerning a Point of the last Importance, might reasonably suppose such a Consent, but even here the Inference would be unjust; for who either can deny, that in the Catalogues we have received of the Canonical Books, from the most ancient and authentic

thentick Counfels, there is a very considerable Difference, or that the Determination of the Canon was a Matter of the utmost Importance?

THESE Differences concerning Matters of Belief or Practice, unessential to the Christian Religion, are so far from weakning the Foundations of it, that indeed they reflect a great Light upon that Argument for the Truth of Christianity, which we derive from the universal Consent of Christians, in some particular Matters of greater Importance.

THAT there has been such an universal Agreement and Consent of all Christians, in every particular Church and Age, in some Articles of Belief, and Matters of Practice, cannot be denied; but then it must be allowed, that these are very few, and very plainly contained in the sacred Writings, and therefore neither need, nor can derive any further Authority or Obligation from the Definitions of Councils, or the Judgment of ancient Writers, than they have already received from the sacred Writings.

8. THE Christian Religion is very much concerned in the Truth of certain Facts, upon which it is founded. As these are all laid down in the New Testament, so they have all the Certainty which Historical Proof can give them. Whatever Instruction we receive from Ecclesiastical Authors, concerning the Truth of the Gospel-History, is a valuable Addition to our Knowledge, and a good Reason why we should carefully peruse these ancient Writings;

ings ; but then as we do not need the same Assistance in order to understand the necessary Articles of Christian Belief, the Records of Antiquity cannot be equally serviceable to us in the Decision of Controversy, or doubtful Matters, as they are in confirming the Truth of those Facts, about the Certainty of which all Christians in every Age have agreed.

9. THESE good Authors which some are apt to overvalue, have left us their own Accounts of Christian Doctrine, without any Pretence to Authority ; they never dream'd to impose their own Opinions upon Posterity, as the Standard of right Belief. It has been observed by *Dallee*, that their Writings have nothing of the Air or Mein of authoritative Decisions, and that they never imagined they had the least Claim to that implicate Belief, which some have inconsiderately allowed them.

HAD they conceived the least Imagination that Posterity were to be determined by the Authority of their Writings, they would have been at more Pains in the Composition ; we should not have had so many extemporary Homilies under the Names of *Augustin* or *Chrysostom* ; nor would the best Commentaries of Antiquity been composed with so much haste, and stuff'd with so many different and heterodox Opinions ; a plain Proof that Treatises composed with so little Accuracy, were never intended to be infallible Decisions of Truth and Orthodoxy.

10. HAD these venerable Persons arrogated to their own Writings an undue Regard, the Presumption had been abundantly confuted by these obvious Marks of Frailty, which are every where observed in the most Learned of the Fathers.

ERRORS are found in their Works, not only of trivial Nature about Chronology, the Names of Places, and the Derivation of Words, or about Matters of great Difficulty, into which they had little Occasion to enquire, or of little Consequence to the Cause of Religion, which they were not at Pains to consider: But indeed Errors in those Points of Religion, in which they are pretended to be the only competent Judges, concerning Matters of Fact which they had Access to know, and some of the most important Articles of Christian Religion, of which they were zealous Defenders. Errors maintain'd with the greatest Confidence by Persons of the best Learning and Judgment, received not by one or two, or half a Dozen, or by one single Church, but by the Bulk and Generality of Christians; not in one Age only and Period of Time, but for several Ages together.

A Man is confounded with the numerous Instances of Ignorance or Negligence, which *Dallee* and *Whitby*, and many others, indeed the greatest Part of those who have been conversant in the Writings of Antiquity have so freely charged upon them; even those who have pretended to owe their Judgment an absolute

solute Submission, have often made Discoveries and Confessions, when their own Interest was either not attended to, or immediately concerned, which are sufficient to demonstrate, that the Study of Antiquity is really a tedious Maze of Uncertainty, which cannot promise the Inquisitive any Satisfaction. *

A modest Person is struck with the Sense of human Frailty, when he considers how often Religion is blended with Philosophy, and almost lost by the Mixture in some of the most ancient Fathers; when he reflects, that the great Learning of *Origen* could not secure him from some of the grossest and most pernicious Errors; and that the Piety of *Ireneus*, and the Erudition of *Clemens Alexandrinus* is tully'd by Errors, which in a modern Author would be branded with the Name of Heresy; when he reads in *Jerome*, the best Critick of Antiquity, some Passages which are either downright Trifling or Priestcraft; when he observes how much the miraculous Strain was affected by some of the most judicious Writers, and how often their Credulity was imposed upon by Stories evidently silly: In fine, When he considers that the Orthodoxy and Holiness of *Austin* and *Cyprian* could not preserve them from Opinions, which express an uncharitable Severity, and indeed are of very dangerous Consequence. To say no more, the Hopes
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* See Petavius's Notes upon Epiphanius, and the Annals of Baronius.

of the ancient Christians were generally stain'd with the groundless Notion of an intermediate State, and their Worship corrupted by unlawful and superstitious Prayers for the Dead; Errors in Opinion and Practice, of a worse Tendency than many about which modern Christians are now divided, and yet generally received in those Ages, which we are apt to consider with the highest Veneration.

II. As for the Decisions of ancient Councils, enough has been advanced already, to show that they are not of sufficient Authority to determine modern Controversies; or if they were, that we could not be sure that we had a compleat and genuine Collection.

THE *Greeks* so often accused the *Latins*, and the *Latins* again the *Greeks*, of forging, or falsifying the Acts of Councils. So well did each Party manage the Accusation, and so ill the Defence, that it is more than probable they were both very much guilty; indeed so much, that no thinking Person can read the most authentick Acts of ancient Councils, without the reasonable Fear of being imposed upon by some secret Ecclesiastick Fraud.

BESIDES, whatever Assurance we could have to the contrary, a Man who reads the History of ancient Councils will see little Reason to lay the Stress of his Faith upon their Authority. He will not discern any Marks of Infallibility in their Conduct; but, on the contrary, all the Characters of a fallible Judgment, and alas too often all the Symptoms of

of a corrupt Mind. Things were carried, as they are commonly now in greater Assemblies, by Interest and worldly Politicks. Men were the same 1500 Years ago, that they are at this Day ; they were byass'd by the same Passions, paid the same interested Submission to civil Authority, and show'd the same Heat and Animosity in their Differences.

A good Man would bury in Silence the Imperfections and Infirmities of such eminent Witnesses to our Saviour's Religion ; but it is impossible to conceal what all the World knows, nor can an Acknowledgment of Truth do any Harm to a Religion which is founded upon it, while it tends to bring People off an unworthy Dependence upon mere human Authority.

EVERY Christian, who enquires into the Grounds of Religion with Sincerity, has all the Reason to expect a Divine Assistance, which the Promise of God can give him. A Number of good Men, who meet together upon the same Design, may expect the same Assistance : But as every particular Person may mistake, if he wants Sincerity and other proper Qualifications for an Enquiry after Truth ; if he be wanting to himself, or pretends to judge of a Matter which is above his Reach, or beyond his Discovery ; so Assemblies of Men, in the same Circumstances of Disadvantage, are equally liable to Mistake or Imposition. They may err, or be misled without any Imputation upon their Honesty or good

good Intention : Nor can the Numbers, or Character, or Function of any Set of Men, who make up a Council, confer Infallibility upon the Decisions of fallible Men : For fallible Particulars cannot make an infallible Whole ; and if every individual Member of a single Church might err, then every one, and all the Councils of Ecclesiasticks, from the Council of *Nice* to the Conventicle of *Trent*, might have made false Decisions, as a whole Regiment or Army may run away, as well as every particular Soldier who belongs to it.

No Learning or Authority, no Ancientness or Ability are sufficient to reconcile both Parts of a Contradiction, or to make twice two to be four and five at the same Time.

IF Councils then (as an ingenious Author expresses himself) are to be found against Councils ; if an equal Number of Doctors in one Age, contradicted an equal Number in another, and some Councils, as well as some Fathers, thought fit to contradict themselves. In fine, If it appears from Ecclesiastical History, that Religion, at least, after the Council of *Nice* appeared in Twenty Shapes, according to the prevailing Interests and Passions of Men, and Men were either Orthodox or otherwise, as the Wind blew either from this or that Quarter ; I hope if all this is Fact, and has been frequently and abundantly proved, it will be too shameless an Attempt to subject modern Christians to the Decisions of ancient Councils : Altho' no Question could
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be made, Whether we had the genuine Acts of Council, or whether they had suffered no material Corruption or Change, either with or without Design, altho' there was no Difficulty as to the Sense of ancient Canons, and every Man of Letters, or every private Christian was a sufficient Judge of it. I say, Let us put all these Suppositions, which yet it would require infinite Learning or Volumes to prove ; yet after all it will be a Question, which cannot be decided but by Authority, Whether the Council of *Nice* or that of *Armini*, the more numerous of the two, deserves the Preference ? Whether we owe such a Regard to a Majority, as to be obliged to acknowledge a Decision, which was condemned by four general Councils ? What Side we are to take in the famous Question about the Procession of the Holy Ghost, so differently determined by the *Greeks* and *Latins* ? Whether we are to prefer the Council which condemned, or that which approved the *Eutychian* Heresy ? In fine, To what Authority we ought to submit our Judgment concerning Predestination, the Worship of Images, and several other Points about which Ecclesiasticks have thought fit to make very different and and contrary Decisions ?

THESE are Questions which cannot possibly be solved by any Authority, either ancient or modern ; nor can we form any certain Judgment concerning the Subject of these Questions, unless we enquire impartially, whether these

these particular Opinions are reasonable, and agreeable to the only Rule of Christian Doctrine.

THESE and other Remarks which might be made, are sufficient to prove that all Appeals to the Authority of Fathers in Matters of Controversy, and pure Doctrine, are really impertinent.

SOME are well enough content like good Protestants to renounce all Submission to the Authority of the Ancients, as being sensible that they are not competent Judges, or conscious that they can gain no Countenance from them to their particular Tenets, to which these ancient Writings are not all favourable, or declining to be at the Pains which is necessary to understand them: Whatever is the Reason, if the Fathers are really against them; seeing they pretend to build their Sentiments upon a better Authority, they are undoubtedly obliged to be against the Fathers. All Appeals to their Tribunal may, upon this Supposition, be justly condemned as an Affront to a Superior Authority, and inconsistent with the Protestant Maxim, that the sacred Writings are the only Rule of Decision.

BUT those who disown the Authority of ancient Decrees, must take Care not to pay that undue Submission to modern; for such a Conduct will be equally inconsistent with the singular Regard which is due to Scriptures, and more unreasonable, as it cannot be excused by the same plausible Pretences of Reason. Modern Doctors live at a great Distance
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from the Time of the Apostles, and want many Advantages for understanding the Scriptures, which a *Greek*, or even a *Latin* Father was Master of. We may for Example easily suppose, that a Divine now-a-days may be better versed in Philosophy and the *Belles Lettres*, than either *Chrysostom* or *Theodoret* was, yet certainly the Education of either must entitle him to an exacter Knowledge of the New Testament than a modern Critick can possibly acquire. Just so, any Person that is now brought up at the Feet of *Gamaleil*, may easily surpass *Ignatius* or *Clemens Romanus*, in Subtility of Reasoning and Metaphysical Skill, which are of no great Use in Religion; but it is really improbable that Persons who were cotemporary with the immediate Disciples and Followers of the Apostles, should not at least have as good a Notion of Christian Doctrine, as any modern Student of Divinity.

W H A T E V E R Ground therefore we have for rejecting the Sentiments of Ecclesiastical Writers, and Decrees of ancient Councils, as an incompetent Authority to determine Controversy; we have the same and much better Reason to disclaim all the modern Pretensions of uninspired Teachers to dictate and impose; any Shadow of Authority of this Kind which Men can pretend to, being exceedingly weakened by 1700 Ages, and by this Time dwindled into nothing at all.

1. 'Tis certain however that while Protestants, according to their acknowledged Principles, re-

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nounce all Submission to the Judgment of Men, they are very readily guilty in this Way. Tho' no Fault is more generally condemned than Credulity, there is none to which religious People are more generally liable; some particular Doctor or other, a Person who distrusts his own Understanding is inclined to chuse for a Spiritual Dictator; and when once he has trusted his Conscience in such good Hands, he is willing to pay the utmost Deference to his better Judgment, and to make him as entire a Complement of his Reason, as would abundantly satisfy the old Gentleman at *Rome*.

THIS Choice is ordinarily determined by the Place a Man lives in, his Opportunities of Acquaintance, and the particular Esteem and Affection he has contracted for a Man of eminent Character.

By this Means it happens that a Person who has no Manner of Pretension to Infallibility on one Side of the *Tweed*, may have large Claims on the other, and a Doctor may be voted into the Chair by a Million of Admirers under one Climate, who has no Manner of Interest or Authority in another Latitude.

SOME are determined by a comparative Notion of the Person they pitch upon; if Dr. T—— or D. B—— pass for *Latitudinarius*, and unworthy of Confidence; it is odds but D. O—— or D. B—— are chosen in Regard of their opposite Character. Or if Dr. H—— or D. S—— are cast for the Sus-
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picion of ill Designs, and a Propension to Heterodoxy, Ten to One the Choice falls upon D. T—— B——, who is known to be perfectly Staunch.

SOMETIMES the Submission grows into an Habit, as in the case of a venerable Person, whom we have long and often heard with Admiration; we are naturally enclined to believe, that he is never very much mistaken, at least that he is eternally in the right in Matters of great Importance; for tho' such a Person neither is nor pretends to be infallible, yet he cannot be charged with Error without a very high Presumption.

2. BUT this natural Propensity to a Popish Slavery of Mind, is not the peculiar Weakness of Persons sincerely Religious. People who are Free-thinkers by Profession, are frequently chargeable with a Credulity which they every Day ridicule. While they laugh in their Sleeve at the established Religion, 'tis a Thousand to one but they have conferred Infallibility on some favourite Author. If the Epistles of St. *Paul* are not allowed their just Authority, *Shaftsbury's* Characteristicks may come to pass for Canonical. *Spinoza* may pretend to all the Honour which Inspiration could deserve, meerly because he had the Assurance to deny it; and a single Passage in the *Leviathan* may be thought to deserve more Applause, than all the Wisdom of both Old and New Testament.

IN this Manner the natural Credulity of Mankind, imposes upon them in a Thousand Shapes, and under every Disguise. Hence instead of using their own Judgment, and trusting to the only Authority of the sacred Scriptures, we are glad to seek Protection and Countenance to our Opinions, from every grave Appearance of Learning and Piety, or every proud Dogmatizer in Atheism and Philosophy.

3. 'TWOULD be in vain to prove, that every Man is allowed and required to enquire into the Truth of Religion, and to use his own private Judgment about it, without a Dependence upon any Authority, either ancient or modern. It would be vain, I say, to shew from Passages of Scripture, that this is the Duty and Privilege of all the World; for we must not lay any Stress upon the sacred Writings, when the Truth of Religion is the Matter in Question. There is a good Reason besides, why it would be needless in this Place to vindicate certain abused Texts, from the perverse Interpretation of some Pretenders to Authority, *namely*, that 'tis a meer Jest to found a Privilege in any Set of Men upon the sacred Writings, which makes them perfectly needless, and contradicts them in every Page. To say the Truth, Men would appear more in earnest, if they laid these valuable Books aside, as perfectly irreconcilable to their unjust Pretensions than express a supreme Regard to Writings, as the only Rule

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of right Belief, at the same Time that they are pleased to charge them with the plainest Contradictions.

4. IF Men are allowed the Liberty of Enquiry, whether the Scriptures are the Word of God, it would be hard to deny them the Privilege of judging what is the true Sense of it; for this Reason, that the first would be insignificant, and of no real Use without the other. For what Advantage can a Man receive from a Revelation, which he is not allowed to understand? What would a Rule of Faith and Practice signifie, if every Man is not permitted to judge what is agreeable or disagreeable, what forbid or commanded by it, but must be determined by the Judgment of others, who may have a Design and an Interest to impose upon him?

5. EVERY Protestant will readily allow that Orthodoxy or right Belief depends upon a Discovery of the genuine Sense of the sacred Writings, and that Heresy in Opinion consists properly in a Deviation from that Sense; but the great Question will be, whether every Man is to be determined by his own private Judgment, or by the Dictates of a particular Set of Men? Yes, no doubt, says a grave Person, every Man is bound to follow his Conscience; and to receive or reject every Opinion after a mature Consideration. But pray, Sir, may one be allowed to ask, what is the Meaning then of prescribed Forms of Faith and Orthodoxy? Why do you require that every Man should

should interpret the Scripture your own Way, before you admit him to all the Privileges of Church Communion? Where is the Liberty of private Judgment, if Men are discouraged to employ their own Faculties in a free and impartial Search after Truth, or to follow the Result of it?

6. THERE is a Sort of Persecution, which every good Man must be very sensible of, and which no Person can well avoid, who has the ill Luck to dissent from the Judgment of the Community. Unfavourable Impressions, Surmises of Heresy, and a consequent Disgust to his Person, are Disadvantages which ordinarily attend an honest Enquirer after Truth. If such a Person happens to fall in with your System, or chime to the received Doctrines, then indeed he may have all the Honour to which Orthodoxy can entitle him; then he shall be hugg'd as a Christian of the right Stamp, and in the true Church, even altho' you cannot positively say, whether his Choice might not have been determined by Interest, the Love of a Party, or some other Motive, than an impartial Regard to Truth; but if the same Person has unfortunately slip'd into an Opinion, which your System condemns as an Error of the last Importance, then all the Odium which a Heretick and impious Person can deserve, must fall to his Share. 'Tis not enough that the erroneous Person shows all the Marks of Honesty and sincere Regard to Truth, that he appears to have received no Byass

Byas from Interest and mean Considerations, that he is known to have all the Means of Enquiry, and to make a diligent Use of them; in fine, that he expresses the sincerest Regard to the Rule of Faith, an unfeign'd Love to the Author of Religion, and an entire Submission to the Laws of the Gospel: No, all these Qualities, and twenty more of the same Kind, are insufficient to atone for the unlucky Mistake. Nay, 'tis a thousand to one, but the Behaviour of such an innocent Dissenter is in every Instance interpreted with the utmost Malice; that the Reprobate shall appear in every Action, and the Heretick in every harmless Opinion, by which he happens to differ from the Society: For after Men have stamp'd an imaginary Importance upon their own particular Opinions, and made them essential to the true Faith, it is no Wonder, that every inconsiderable Difference is branded with the most odious Name, and the Author sent to the Devil, merely for the Presumption of judging for himself.

7. BUT in the Name of Goodness, who art thou that judges another Man's Servant? With what Pretence of Reason or Charity can you condemn a Person as guilty before God, whose visible Conduct carries all the Appearance of Sincerity? Can you penetrate into the Secrets of his Heart, and discover a latent Malignity under a favourable Outside? Can you know the real Importance and Aggravation of an Error, while you are ignorant

rant of the true Causes from which it proceeds? Can you precisely determine what Opinions may, or what may not consist with an upright Heart? Or can you seriously believe that every Man is out of the Road to Heaven, whose Conscience is not perfectly adjusted to your Standard? Or that Sincerity, or the Want of it is nothing, if a Man agrees or disagrees with your particular Church or Society.

8. A Person must have a very good Opinion of his own Understanding, who pretends to determine what is right or wrong, what true or false in a thousand Questions of Religion. The Evidence is not so convincing on either Side, as to bear the Weight of a positive Conclusion, or lay an honest Enquirer under a Necessity of taking one Side of the Question. A wise Man will be apt to suspend his Judgment, when he wants sufficient Evidence to determine him; or if a received Article of Faith does not evidently appear to him in that View, he will not, if he has common Honesty, make a contrary Profession: But why must he in any Respect be a Sufferer for such a Refusal? Why must he forfeit his Interest in your Love and Esteem, or be denied the charitable Regard which belongs to every Member of a Christian Society? Why must he be excluded from the common Rights of Christians, or refused the Honour of joining with you in the common Acts of Christianity? Or why must he be denied the Privilege of Ministerial

rial Communion, if his moral Character and Abilities otherwise entitle him to it? In fine, Does it look like a Regard to Religion or Sincerity, or the Right of private Judgment, to lay Men under Discouragements for acting an honest Part, or following the Result of an impartial Enquiry? Are Men to be allowed the Liberty of judging for themselves, and afterwards punished for using it? Or is it agreeable to Reason and Christianity, to distinguish Men, not according to their real Merits, but their unavoidable Differences, not according to the Terms of Acceptance with God, but an accidental Agreement or Disagreement with certain received Systems of Orthodoxy, which few have Abilities to enquire into, which the wisest may mistake, and which frequently contain Matters of very little Consequence to a good Life, or a future Happiness.

9. SOME Orthodox infallible Stickler for a System will be apt to suggest, that every Society has a Right to determine what shall be the Qualifications of its own Members; and therefore may receive or exclude People as they are, or are not qualified in a particular Manner. But this Suggestion is either false, or nothing to the Purpose: For the Christian Church, or the collective Body of Christians, in any particular Place, is no voluntary Society established upon arbitrary Laws of humane Appointment; and therefore we cannot

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infer from the Privilege of every human Society to determine the Terms of Admission, that any Society of Christians has the same Privilege ; the Reason of the Difference is, That Christians are tied down to the Prescriptions of the Gospel, and are obliged to stand to these Terms of Communion, which our Saviour has before determined. They have no Right therefore to receive into the Church, or exclude from it, according to their own Fancy and Liking, but are obliged, by the supreme Authority, to acknowledge all for Christians, who have the requisite Qualifications of that Character, I mean those which are expressly laid down in the Scripture : Nor can they, without a manifest Affront to that Authority, refuse to own such either as Fellow-Christians, or Preachers of the Gospel, who are qualified according to this Prescription, altho' they cannot come up to the particular Terms of a human Constitution.

As for those Qualifications enjoyn'd by human Authority, which are not either essential to Religion, or prescribed by the Gospel, they can be considered under no other Notion, than mere human Appointments, which can be of no Use, but to promote the Interests of a Party, to the evident Danger of Christian Charity, and the plain Discouragement of private Enquiry.

10. BUT is not every Man obliged to contend for the Faith? Is not every Christian commanded to reject an Heretick? And are not some Opinions so evidently contain'd in Scripture, that no Body can deny them, who acknowledges that Authority. Very true: But who is the infallible Teacher from whom we must learn, what is, or what is not necessary to be believed? Or how can a Person be an Heretick to us, even suppose we know him to err in a Matter of Importance, while we do not know the Secrets of his Heart, or the Causes of that Error, which may be perfectly innocent or unavoidable? Does the Scripture Notion of Heresy merely include a Mistake of the Judgment? Or does it not likewise take in certain moral Qualities, which modern Christians may not be capable to judge of? These are Questions which must be answered before we can determine what is or what is not Heresy.

11. As for the Duty which lies upon every Christian to contend for the Faith. If that Contention was rightly managed, Christian Liberty would suffer nothing by the most zealous Discharge of it; For, pray, How are we obliged to contend for the Faith? Surely by the Methods of Persuasion and fair Reasoning, and not by Violence or Force, or any Way inconsistent with the free Judgment of Dissenters; besides, it is proper that we form a right Notion of what we contend for. Faith is an ambiguous Word, which may bear a very

different Sense, and may either signify those Articles of Belief, which are necessary to constitute a Christian, or other Points of Faith, which do not belong to the Essence of Religion. We may well allow the Contention to run higher for the Sake of the last, than for any particular Opinion about which wise and good Men may be divided in their Judgment. The Interests of true Virtue and Goodness may require the highest Degree of Zeal, tho' an ordinary Pitch of it may be sufficient for Matters of ordinary Importance.

12. **W**HATEVER be the Object of our Zeal, we must take Care not to violate the Laws of Charity and Justice in the Prosecution of it; we must not pretend to deprive or abridge others of a Liberty which we lay Claim to ourselves. And as we would not be content that another should impose his Religion upon us, or discourage us in the Use of the common Rights of Humanity, we must not presume to treat him with that Injustice.

13. As the Occasions of a different Judgment concerning Religion, as Education, harmless Prejudice, Attachment to Party, and a Regard to Friendship, are very different in different Persons; and as these are frequently the necessary and innocent Causes of various Sentiments; in order to preserve that charitable Union, which is the Bond of Perfection, and so frequently inculcated in the sacred Writings, it is absolutely necessary, that as all
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Men are liable to the Frailty of a mistaken Judgment, so all should be ready to forbear and tolerate those, who are in a different Way of Thinking.

IF every Person should refuse to acknowledge another as a Fellow-Christian, upon the Score of some lesser Difference of Opinion, which he is inclined to aggravate, or if every Society of Christians should exclude some of their Number from the Privileges of Church Communion upon the same Account, what would be the Consequence of such an universal Liberty in Christians to excommunicate and separate one from another; but that Church Communion in the common Acts of Religion would be thereby destroyed, and Christians necessarily divided and subdivided into an infinite Number of Parties and Factions, in so much that in Process of Time, every Man would be a Church to himself, and a different Profession of Religion from all the World besides.

FOR if Mankind unavoidably fall into different Sentiments of Religion, and the most harmless Differences are apt to be made the Marks of Distinction between this and that Party, (as every Man and every Society from Interest and Self-love, and a Desire to be uppermost, is inclined to advance their own peculiar Opinions to the Rank of necessary Articles of Faith) seeing every particular Church or Person has a Title equally good to judge for himself, as any other can pretend to, and
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to condemn all Dissenters from his Way; what will become of the sacred Bonds of Charity, by which all Christians ought to be united? What endless Animosity and uncharitable Contention must necessarily arise, while every Man pretends to impose his Opinions upon every other? Must not Religion, the best Thing in the World, at this Rate degenerate into the greatest Mischief, and at last terminate in the utter Ruin of Society, and all the Dismal Consequences of Religious Hatred.

14. To prevent these unhappy Effects, shall the Orthodox or right Believers engross the sole Privilege of determining what Opinions shall be received as true, or rejected as false, when every Man and every Church is as much so in his own Judgment as another? Shall the Majority of a Christian Society decide Religious Controversy for the rest, and Articles of Faith be determined by a Poll? Shall the Magistrates Religion be the Standard of Orthodoxy, and the only Rule of Faith, to which private Consciences must submit? Or shall one Christian Church or Society pretend to impose her own Belief upon all the Churches of the World? Whatever Method we may think of to prevent the Mischiefs of Religious Contention, whatever Means we may use to preserve Union and Charity, we shall find them all vain and ineffectual, unless the Foundation of Peace be laid in mutual Forbearance. Every other Attempt to cure the Di-

Divisions of Christians, must end either in the Sacrifice of private Judgment to the Authority of a particular Set of Men, or in a Subjection of the Consciences of a few to the Humour or Conscience of the many.

15. BUT the Rights of Mankind as to the Choice of Religion, and the particular Form and Profession of it, are every where, and to all Persons the same. As the Merit of superior Learning and Piety, and other Advantages, cannot give a particular Person any Right to impose his own Opinions upon another ; so no one particular Church or Society of Christians, can have any Claim to oblige her own Members, or any other Society ; nor can her Definitions receive any such Authority, either from Antiquity, the Favour of the Civil Magistrate, or a greater Purity in Worship and Doctrine.

16. FOR as the last Pretension has the only Appearance of Reason, so it can give no Countenance to any Claim in one Church, to prescribe and dictate to another, or to the Members of the same Society ; because the Truth of it must stand the Test of every Man's Examination, and the Doctrine and Worship of every Church must be to every Man what he judges them to be.

17. IF a Christian therefore after the best Use of the Holy Scriptures, and his own private Judgment, cannot perceive that the Worship or Doctrine prescribed by Authority, is either Orthodox or Lawful, he not only may, but is oblig-

obliged in Conscience to separate from that Society, nor can the Person, whatever Authority they may pretend to upon the Score of Learning, Piety, and the Civil Establishment, from whose Communion he departs, justly reckon themselves injured by such a Separation.

18. NOTWITHSTANDING this Liberty belongs to every Man, yet as he owes a Debt of Christian Charity and Friendship to the particular Society or Church, of which he is Member, he must not capriciously depart from her Communion, that is, he is obliged to continue in it, till either the Unlawfulness of the Terms make it unlawful, or a reasonable Prospect to be more useful in another Profession, oblige him to join another Church.

19. As it can never be reconciled with Reason or Charity, that every Man should be at Liberty upon every Difference of Opinion to separate from a Christian Society; so it must be equally unlawful for any Church to excommunicate or exclude, even from the highest Privileges of Church Communion, Men who are otherwise innocent, meerly because they have the Misfortune to dissent from some received Opinions, which are not of the last Importance, and confessed to be unessential.

20. FROM the undoubted Right in every Man to chuse his own Way of religious Worship, and the Obligation on all Christians to bear with the Errors and Mistakes of those in the same Communion, and to cultivate a good Understanding with all Christians of other

ther Societies, it seems to follow that all those Methods are unlawful, which straiten Church Communion, and exclude those Christians from our Society, who are sufficiently qualified, according to the Terms of the Gospel, as being not only contrary to Charity, but an Affront to that Supreme Authority, by which the Qualifications of Church Members, and the Terms of Christian Communion are already settled.

21. FOR the same Reason it appears, that all those Marks of Distinction, by which single Churches would pretend to the sole Privilege of Orthodoxy and right Belief, in Opposition to other Societies, are not only Signs of human Vanity and Presumption, but indeed contrary to the Law of Charity, as they are Hindrances and Discouragements to the universal Duty of private Judgment, and particular Enquiry.

22. IN fine, there is no Way to reconcile the Practice of Charity and Church Communion, with the common Right of every Christian to judge and chuse for himself, but for every Church to suffer all the Dissenters from the Majority of that Society to continue in that Communion, and to enjoy all the Privileges of it, till such Time as they think themselves obliged in Conscience for some important Reason, consistent with Charity, to separate from it.

IN which Case, as every Man is only accountable to the Supreme Lawgiver for his

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Conduct in the Choice of Religion; no Church can detain a Person in its Communion against his Will, nor deny him, after his Separation, the same Offices of Humanity, and Regards of Christian Friendship, which he could pretend to before.

23. THE Exercise of mutual Charity and Forbearance towards Christians of the same Society, and Dissenters of a different Communion, can bring no Detriment or Danger to Orthodoxy or Right Belief: People may retain their own Opinions, and be sufficiently persuaded both of their Truth and Importance, tho' they allow others to live quietly among them, of a different Persuasion. A sincere Attachment to Conscience and private Judgment, will readily encline a Man to indulge others the same Liberty. Nay, every Reflection which a Person of Honesty makes upon himself, and the Motives of his own Choice, will be an Argument with him against all Severity and unkind Treatment of others upon the Score of Religion, while it assures him that the Principles of Conscience and Sincerity are not to be shaken or born down by the Force of worldly Discouragements.

24. A Man who has any Notion of the indispensable Obligation of Charity and Christian Communion, or the lesser Degrees of Importance of certain Opinions about which Christians are divided, will not be apt to reckon it a Hardship that he is obliged to live in the same Church and Profession with those
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who differ from him. A Person so well informed cannot imagine that a meer Error can disoblige him from the Offices of Charity to a fallible Brother ; he cannot think it an uneasy Restraint upon his own Liberty, that he is not at Liberty to deprive other People of theirs, or to break with them, meerly because they make best Use of their own Understanding.

WE may carry the Argument farther ; a Person who is conscious he is not above Mistake himself, may contribute his *Quota* to the Maintenance of a mistaken Minister, without the least Danger to his own Orthodoxy. For as no Body is obliged to receive all the Opinions of his Teacher, what Harm can he receive by hearing a Discourse once or twice a Week upon the necessary Articles of Religion, tho' he cannot agree with him about other Matters of lesser Importance ? Does a Minister become immediately incapable to show you the Road to eternal Happiness, when he falls into a Mistake ? Or does he presently forfeit the Regards which are due to his Character ? Sure he may, notwithstanding that Difference both deserve and stand in need of a charitable Maintenance ; and it would be very unlike the Charity of the Gospel to abandon an innocent Person and a Family to their Necessity, meerly because he cannot come up to a Subscription, or has fail'd in a Point of Speculation, which may be neither he, nor even your self, can pretend to understand.

25. PERHAPS you'll be apt to say, The Matters about which we differ are of the last Importance, and so clearly laid down in Scripture, that no Man can be mistaken about them, who own that Authority.

BUT pray, Sir, consider, whether the Importance you ascribe to the Matter in Question be real or imaginary? Whether a Man may not differ from you upon that Article, and continue to love the Author of his Religion, and to perform all the Offices of Piety and Charity? If you cannot deny that he may; you must not suffer your Mind to be so far sour'd towards your Brother, as to doubt that it proceeds from an innocent Cause. You must not suppose that he has forfeited by it those Offices of Charity, which one Christian may expect from another.

YOU may likewise consider, whether Prejudice of Education, Warmth of Temper, or a Design to gain Favour with a Party, may not dispose you to aggravate the Difference; whether an Unwillingness to join with some Persons in the common Acts of Religion, be not more a Consideration of Interest, than the Effect of an honest Zeal, and proceed more from the Regards of Friendship to a particular Society, than any Conviction of what you ought to do.

As for what you say, That the Matters in Dispute are evidently contained in Scripture. You must not therefore conclude, that every Man must see them to be there, because
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you do ; no more than you can say that every Man's Eyes are as good as your own, and can see at the same Distance. Allowances must be made for Difference of Understanding, natural Sagacity, and Opportunities of Knowledge. Your Brother does not pretend to all the Advantages you are possess'd of, or it may be, if you could admit the Thought, he may have a juster Notion of the Matter than your self ; he may without reading so many Systems, or poring so much upon difficult Speculation, make a truer Judgment of the Christian Doctrine ; he may without possessing a Chair so long be freer from the Biass of Interest and worldly Affection than your self. In fine, he may either have a better Understanding and larger Charity ; or if he is in the Wrong, he may owe his Error to certain innocent Prejudices, which in a great Measure atone for the Guilt of it, while your most fervent Appearance for Truth may be no more than an empty Blaze of interested Affection.

26. HUMILITY, and a just Sense of our own Frailty, would be apt to suggest a Thousand kind Extenuations in Favour of an erroneous Brother ; at least, the Difficulty of discovering the Truth, in some abstruse religious Subjects, perplex'd by Dispute, would incline a modest Man to a favourable Judgment, and give him the utmost Aversion to the Vanity of making his own Understanding a Rule and Standard to others.

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Y O U, Sir, who are so zealous a Champion for Orthodox Belief, may possibly suffer your Zeal to outrun your Knowledge. Can you say with Conscience, that you are sufficiently instructed as to the Matters in Question, that you have Leisure and Abilities sufficient to fathom the Subject, and have made the best Use of them? Have you all requisite Advantages for a fair Enquiry, and have you proceeded in it with a due Caution? If you can neither pretend to have done all this, or to have Abilities of doing it, you ought to suspend your Judgment till you are better informed; at least you cannot come to any positive Conclusion, either in Favour of one Side, or t'other. But if you are not so much Master of your self as to give Way to calm Reflection, and a modest Fear of being in the Wrong; if you suffer your Zeal to boil over, and flatter your self with the groundless Presumption of being only and wholly in the Right, believe me nothing less than Inspiration and Infallibility can justify such a Conduct.

27. F E W or none are presumptuous enough to make their own particular Opinions so absolutely necessary, that all who dissent from them are in a damnable State: Some whose Charity is too much confin'd, do notwithstanding allow that Acceptance with God and eternal Happiness, depends upon something else than Conformity to a System, or the Order of a Church.

SINCERITY, or an honest Endeavour to please God, and to acquire those Virtues by which we resemble him, will entitle any Man, thro' the Merits of Christ, to the Divine Favour, whatever may be his particular Church or Profession; and all the Orthodoxy of the World will be of no Avail to his Acceptance, without that Endeavour. Wherever this Characteristick of a true Christian is decerned, it ought to be a more effectual Recommendation of the Possessor, than any other Agreement in Opinion or Practice. Whatever Scheme of Philosophy such a Person may think fit to espouse, whatever System he may be fond of, or whether he owns any at all, he is certainly in the Road to Heaven, and every Christian should be glad to join his Company: He is acceptable to God, and no Set of Men need be afraid to show him Favour, and admit him to all the Privileges of a Christian Society. But if Interest, Pique, or a proud aspiring to Superiority, should incline them to disown him as a Fellow-Christian, if they are glad to find a Flaw in his Faith, or pretend to exclude him from Christian Communion upon the Score of different Sentiments consistent with Christian Sincerity: They must expect to answer one Day for such uncharitable Usage, to the God of Peace, and the Patron of the Upright.

28. ALL Christians are agreed, that the vitious Part of Mankind are under the Displeasure of God, and exposed to eternal Misery:

fery : The Society of such Persons therefore must be attended with more Danger to good Morals, and more Contagion, than the Communion of sincere, tho' erroneous Believers. It has happened however, that the last have every where been either discouraged and abridged of certain Privileges, or banish'd from the Society, while the immoral Orthodox Person has frequently met with kinder Treatment. The fraudulent or whoring Church-man has frequently purchased an Indulgence to his Sins, by a more abundant Conformity, while the chaste and innocent Dissenter has suffer'd all the Severity of Persecution. A Sinner of our own Church is often more acceptable to us, than a sincere Christian of another ; and a deceitful Subscription has sometime attoned for the greatest Crimes, while an honest Dissent has been a Foundation of endless and irreconcilable Dislike ; according to the Poet's Observation.

*Zeal stands a Sentry at the Gate of Sin ;
And they that have the Word pass freely in.*

ALL the World however are ready to acknowledge, that an Error may proceed from very innocent Causes. A *Lutheran* or *Antinomian* may be led into his wrong Belief, by Motives sufficient to determine an honest Man of a good Understanding ; nay the Prejudice of Education may give him so strong a Bias one Way, that he shall no more be able
to

to chuse to be of a contrary Persuasion, than he can make himself to be six or seven Foot high. 'Tis to no Purpose to quarrel with him for the Absurdity of his Choice, the Features of his Mind are as different from yours, as the Complexion and Make of his Body.

ON the Contrary, all Vice and Immorality proceeding from a wilful Defect, is chargeable upon our own Depravity; and therefore can admit of no Justification from Circumstances and Necessity. What should be the Reason then that we are so inclinable to compassionate the Sinner, while we have no Mercy at all for the Hetrodox, or the Men of another Church? It would be hard to give a better Reason than this, That all Heresy or Dissent from our Judgment about Religion, seems to be an Affront to our better Understanding, and a Pretension to be wiser than our selves; whereas Sin and Immorality strike mainly against God. But can a Partiality so obvious consist with a sincere Regard to Religion? Does it favour more of Piety, or of the particular Humour and Interest of a Party? What but the most extravagant Excess of Ambition and Self-love could kindle a Zeal, which would consume all who presume to differ from us, which gently warms the Orthodox Sinner, while it flames out into terrible Eruptions upon the virtuous Dissenter? Can a Passion so Diabolical and Unchristian be thought a Fire from Heaven, or rather is not

a Spark of that Fire, that Heat without Light, which is prepared for the Uncharitable.

28. No Method has made more Havock of Charity and Brotherly-love, than the usual Trick of distinguishing People of a different Judgment, by harsh and unfavourable Epithets; nothing has proved a more effectual Discouragement to a free and impartial Search after Truth. Heresy and Schism are the common Terms of Compliment, which People bestow upon one another, when they are pleased to be angry upon a religious Account. No sooner does a Man leave one Society of Christians, and join the Communion of another, than he is branded as a Heretick, by the Party he has left. 'Tis no Matter whether any positive Idea is affixed to the Word, 'tis enough that it stands for a very odious Character, and a Composition of every bad Quality.

BUT indeed it can be no Crime to join any one Profession or Sect of Religion, after a mature Consideration, even tho' a Man should happen to act from a Mistake, unless it be a Crime for a Man to judge for himself. 'Tis sufficient Justification, that a Person follows the Light of his own Reason, without any Byas from Interest, or such Motives as do not belong to the Merits of the Cause.

A Dissent from the Majority of a Church is no Heresy; and therefore a Separation upon that Dissent can be no Schism, unless we suppose, as one says, "Churches made like Traps, easy to
" admit

“ admit one ; but when once he is in, there
 “ he must always stick, either for the Pleasure
 “ or Profit of the Trap setters.”

SHOULD a Member of a Christian Church for-
 sake the Society, merely because they
 would not own certain Opinions as necessary
 Articles of Faith, which were not clearly
 contained in the Rule of Faith, such a Sepa-
 ration would indeed be Heresy and Schism,
 it would be a Departure from the common
 Standard of Orthodoxy, and a Violation of
 Church-Communion, merely because his own
 private Opinions were not allowed the Honour
 to be Articles of Faith, and of equal Authori-
 ty with the Holy Scriptures.

AND should any Church or Society exclude
 any of her Number from the Privileges of
 Christian Communion, because he would not
 profess to believe as Articles of Christian
 Faith, what he could not perceive to be con-
 tained in Scripture ; That Church, whatever
 her Authority or Advantages might be, and
 whatever Countenance she might receive from
 the Civil Magistrate, would, by that unjust
 Exclusion, become guilty to all Intents and
 Purposes both of Heresy and Schism.

INDEED Want of Charity, and a De-
 parture from the common Rule of Faith,
 would make any Majority whatsoever to de-
 serve the Brand of Heresy, and a close Ad-
 herence to the Holy Scriptures as the Rule of
 Faith, and a charitable Regard to all who ac-
 knowledge the same Authority, is sufficient

to vindicate a single Dissenter from that Imputation, and that in Opposition to a Thousand great Names, and a whole established Church.

I. THERE are few Cases of Conscience more difficult than those which

The Civil Magistrate has no Right to discourage private Judgment.

relate to the Power of the Civil Magistrate, and the Degree of Submission due to his Authority ; and this Difficulty proceeds in a great Measure from the Clearness of the Scripture concerning the Duty of every Christian to obey the Civil Magistrate, and at the same Time to follow the Dictates of his own Conscience. On the one Hand, We are commanded to obey the Powers that are ; not only when they are just and good, but likewise when they are wicked and unjust. On the other, It is a plain Maxim, both of natural and revealed Religion, that when the Commands of the Sovereign interferes with the Divine Authority, we are obliged to obey God rather than Man.

BUT as there is an infinite Variety of Opinions about the Will of God, and every Man is apt to call his own particular Fancy by that Name, tho' all are agreed as to the Principle, and are ready to appeal to it, few are of the same Judgment, as to the Application of it in particular Instances. *

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* See Ueberus de jure civitatis, Lib. 1. Cap. 24. and Ludovicus Fabricius de limitibus obsequii erga homines.

NOR will it be easy to show how we shall determine the just Bounds of Authority and private Conscience, if once we allow that the Sovereign has any proper Authority at all to prescribe to his Subjects in Matters of Religion.

2. SOME who were sensible of the Difficulty have complimented the Civil Magistrate with so exorbitant a Power, as make all Religion to depend upon his Authority, and to be a mere Creature of the State. The Magistrate, if we may believe these Gentlemen, has a Right to make Articles of Faith for his Subjects, and every one is obliged to subscribe them without asking Questions. If they have a false Religion imposed upon them, the Sovereign is only accountable for that Imposition. Every Body sees the Drift of a Doctrine so pernicious; and that if Religion is once made to be Law, and Law Religion, there can be no such Thing as private Conscience at all. Old *Hobb's* was the first, who told the World so much in plain *English*; but the Politicks of those who have strained the Point of Church-Authority, have really led to the same Conclusion. For once set aside the Liberty of every Man to judge for himself, and to chuse his own Religion; the odds will not be great, whether private Judgment is to be over-ruled by the Decisions of a Lay-Man or a Set of Ecclesiasticks. Upon either Supposition, a Man is under no Obligation to be of any Religion at all, but only
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to acquiesce in the Dictates of others with a proper Submission. Whether the *Grand Seignior*, or the *Musti*, the *Czar* or the *Patriarch*, the Bishop of *Rome* or the King of *France*, be the Supreme Authority in Religion, to which the People of *Russia*, of *Turky*, or any other Country are obliged to submit, there can be no such Thing as private Conscience, or any Obligation upon any Subject to enquire after, or profess the true Religion.

NAY if we once bestow upon the Civil Magistrate, a Power of imposing his own Religion upon his Subjects, as the Rights of Sovereignty, and the Duty of Obedience, will be every where the same upon that Hypothesis, the Emperor of *China* must have as good a Right to prescribe to his Subjects as any Christian King whatever; and a *Chinese*, who refuses to acknowledge the Institutions of *Confucius*, must be really as guilty in the Sight of God, as one who openly denies the true Religion. But as it is impossible, that a Man should be under inconsistent Obligations, if the Supreme Authority may challenge a Submission to its Determinations from every Subject, and in every Country, the Consequence is plain, that every Man must play the Hypocrite as well as he can, by a feign'd Conformity to the established Religion.

BUT let us suppose, that the Civil Magistrate has an undoubted Right to discourage every Religion but his own; what would become of such an Authority, if that Maxim should

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should every where take Place, that God is to be obey'd rather than Man? Would not every Man, whether Orthodox or otherwise, pretend to Liberty and Protection from that Rule of Conscience? Did not the *Arians*, when they were persecuted by *Valentinian I.* in the West, appeal to it, while the Orthodox in the Eastern Part of the Empire made Use of the same Plea in their own Defence, at the same Time? Must Conscience only determine People when they are in the Right? Or is it not an universal Rule of Practice, to which the Erroneous are obliged to conform, as well as the Orthodox? And then what becomes of the Magistrates Authority, if no Body is bound to comply with it, unless when private Judgment happens to approve of his Determinations?

3. † This is capable of a Demonstration, that a Power to govern the Conscience is the sole Prerogative of the Deity, and does not come within the Sphere of human Jurisdiction. Religion is never the Province of the Magistrate, unless in Cases where the Interests of Society are affected. In such Instances indeed the Civil Power, as the Guardian of the State, is obliged to provide for its Safety and Preservation against the Shocks it may suffer, either by a mistaken Conscience, or the Pre-
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† See Noodt Discourse upon Liberty of Conscience, Lock's Letter concerning Toleration, Bayle's Philosophical Commentary, Page 106, p. 132. Rights of the Christian Church, Introduction.

tence of it. These are Truths of so great Evidence, and such clear Consequences from the Nature and Ends of Society, and the Institution of Civil Government, that a Man, who disowns them, must either run himself head-long into Atheism, and an universal Subjection of Conscience to the Dictates of Men, or at least into very absurd Mistakes about the Nature and Origine of Civil Societies.

THAT the Degrees of Superiority among Men, are no natural Distinctions, and that all Mankind were originally equal, is very agreeable to that Equality of Nature and Circumstances of Necessity in which we are born; and if all Men are equal, then the Rights of every Man, with respect to every other, must be the same in a State of Nature, or before the Establishment of Laws and Civil Government.

BUT seeing the Equality of natural Right is very often join'd with different Abilities to defend and secure them, and seeing the mutual good Offices and Assistance, which one Man might expect from another in a social State, and the Dangers which particular Persons might be threatned with, without a sufficient Power to provide against them, made it the Interests of Mankind to form Societies: From these Motives it seems the first Men withdrew from the Woods and their solitary Habitations, where they were exposed to the Fury of wild Beasts, or the Insults of Savages of their own Species, and entred into

an Association, in order to promote and secure their own Happiness, that is to defend themselves against external Force and Violence, and to procure these Advantages, which are the Product of a social Life.

FROM the same Source we may derive the Original of civil Government ; for, in order to have a common Protection and Refuge against Violence and Injustice to the weak and injur'd, it was necessary that either one or more Persons should be chosen, and invested with a sufficient Power and Authority to defend the natural Rights and Property of the rest, and likewise to make Laws for the better Government of Society, with Sanctions sufficient to make it every Man's Interest to obey.

THESE Associations and Laws must have supposed either an express or tacit Agreement or Contract, by which every Member of a particular Society, surrendered into the Hands of the Magistrate, upon the Promise of his Protection against Fraud and Injustice, not only the natural Right to defend himself by repelling Force by Force, but all other Powers which were necessary to procure and maintain the Publick Good.

THE Authority of the Magistrate therefore, according to this Account of the Origin of Government, can be nothing else than the Sum or Aggregate of those natural Rights and Powers which belong to the Community

in general, and to every individual Member of it in particular.

IT is plain therefore, that by the Establishment of civil Government, no other Power or Authority was lodged in the Hands of the Magistrate, but the Power which every Man had before in a State of Nature, to seek and procure his own particular Good and Advantage.

BUT as there are certain Rights and Powers, which no Man can be suspected of a Design to make over to the publick Magistrate; *viz.* the Right of Self-defence in case of Attack so sudden, that there is no Time for a Recourse to publick Justice, and the Right of every Man to chuse his own Church, it is plain every Subject must be supposed by the Original Contract to have reserved these in his own Hands; because, supposing it was possible to make over these natural Rights to the Civil Magistrate, yet that Conveyance would have been contrary to the very End and Institution of Government, which was to maintain and secure the greatest Good of every particular Member of the Society.

EVERY Man therefore, as to the Right of Self-defence, and the Choice of his Religion, is in a State of Nature, both with respect to the Civil Magistrate as well as every other Member of Society.

TO understand this we are to consider, that every rational Creature is obliged in a State of Nature to use his own Reason in the Choice
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of proper Means to save his Soul, and to be eternally happy, and no Man can devolve that Obligation upon another. It is plain then no Man can be supposed to authorize the Magistrate to chuse for him, or to maltreat him for the Use of his own Understanding in so important a Choice, much less can any be supposed to empower the Magistrate to persecute another upon the Score of Religion, because the last Supposition would imply that a Man could delegate a Power which he has not himself, and the first that he could disoblige himself from a Duty, which is the highest Improvement of Reason, and inseparably connected with the natural Desire of Happiness.

THUS if we suppose that Societies or Bodies Politick were originally form'd by the Consent of the Parties concerned, (which is the best and indeed the only tolerable Account of the Origin of Government) the Magistrate who is the Head of the Society, can have no more Power in Matters of Religion than every Man had in a State of Nature.

BESIDES, as Men could not altogether part with their Liberty, they agreed to a Restriction of it, only in some particular Instances, and that in order to secure it in the most necessary and important Exercise of it. Now seeing the Right of every Man to chuse that Way of Religion, which he judges to be best, is certainly the most valuable Branch of natural Liberty, we cannot imagine, that the Sovereign by the original Contract, was invested with any Power to

hinder and disturb Men in the Exercise of their own Religion, provided that Religion injoin'd no immoral Practice prejudicial to Society, nor contained any particular Doctrine of ill Tendency, with respect to the Morals and Interest of Society.

ON the contrary, every Man at his Entrance into Society must have been concern'd to secure a Liberty to chuse his own Church, and Protection in the Use of it; he may therefore as justly claim that Protection at the Hands of the Civil Magistrate, either in professing the Belief of some speculative Points, or in that Way of religious Worship, which appears to him best, as he may pretend to it in Matters of a Civil Concernment, in which he is perfectly at his own Disposal.

BUT as the Sovereign is to be considered as the Guardian of the State, every Opinion or Practice in Religion which affects the common Good and Advantage of Society, comes properly within his Sphere and Cognizance.

As the Belief of a Deity is of the greatest Consequence to a Civil Society, being the Foundation of all these Moral Obligations, by the Observance of which it is preserved and made happy; all those Doctrines are obnoxious to the Civil Authority, which tend either directly or by Consequence to the Overthrow of this fundamental Truth, or which imply a Denial of Providence, and lead to Profaneness and Contempt of Religion, and so have a Tendency to render that Belief ineffectual.

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HOWEVER, as the Unity of the God, tho' a Principle of natural Religion, is not perhaps of the same demonstrative Evidence, or of the same necessary Importance to the Welfare of Society, as the Existence of God, it may be justly made a Question, whether Idolatry, tho' a Capital Crime by the Law of *Moses* in the Land of *Canaan*, is to be punished with the same Severity, according to the Law of Nature and the Principles of Christian Religion.*

WHATEVER Judgment we make as to this, we are sure that the Gospel of Jesus Christ, (in which the Unity of God is expressly contained) as it is better calculated than any other to promote good Morals, and the Interests of Mankind, ought to entitle the Professors of it (setting aside its Divine Original, and the Certainty of the Proofs on which it depends) to a particular Favour and Encouragement from the Civil Magistrate; but whether any Man who behaves quietly and a good Member of Society, may deserve Hardship and ill Usage, meerly upon the Score of his Infidelity, is a Point of greater Difficulty.

ANY particular Profession of the Christian Religion, which neither implies an Injury to the Publick, nor subjects the Professor to a foreign Jurisdiction, may claim that Toleration and Defence, which is every Man's Due by the Law of Nature.

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* See Lock's Letter concerning Toleration, and Noode's Discourse of the Power of the Sovereign.

As for the different Modes of Religious Worship used by Christians, altho' doubtless some are more acceptable to the Deity than others, it cannot however be proved, that any particular Form, however disagreeable to the just Notions of God and Religion, can be constructed a Crime against the Civil Government, while no Affront is offered thereby to the Magistrate's Religion, or Injury to the Publick-well.

THERE is no Difference among Christians, so dangerous to Society, as either the barbarous Custom of sacrificing human Victims, or the abandoned Lewdness of the *Bachanals* at *Rome*, or the turbulent Phrenzy of some who called themselves Christians in *Germany*; so that tho' these impudent Pretences to Conscience and Religion were justly suppress'd by the † Civil Magistrate, and every other Enthusiasm or Superstition of the same kind, ought to suffer the same Fate, yet as no Form of Christian Religion is chargeable with the same or like Crimes, none can be supposed to belong so properly to the Civil Cognizance.

THE only Persons therefore which are indeed Criminals, in a civil Sense, upon the Score of Religion, are either the Atheist, who, by denying the Being of God and his Providence, overthrows the best Security for the

† See Suetonius in the Life of Claudius, and Titus Livius, Lib. 39. cap. 14. and Noodt Discourse above quoted, Page 165.

the common Rights and Interests of Mankind, or the persecuting Bigot, who, under the Mask of Religion, pretends to deny others a Liberty, which he would engross to himself and his own Party : Such Person as he plays the Devil, for God's Sake, may be reasonably suspected to be an Atheist at the Bottom ; besides, he is of all others the most injurious to Mankind, and the least deserving of a Toleration, in as much as he is a greater Pest to Society, than either a Robber or Adulterer ; it being really a less Injury to a Man to invade his Property, or make an Attempt upon his Wife, than it is to insult his Conscience, or endeavour to rob him of his Liberty in the most valuable Branch of it.

4. THE Original and Ends of Civil Government are sufficient to afford us a true Notion of the just Extent of the Magistrate's Power in Matters of Religion. The Nature of Religion likewise, if duly considered, would effectually confute all these Methods, by which Mankind have been deprived, or abridged of the Use of their natural Right to chuse for themselves, or discouraged upon that Account.

RELIGION is the Object of a discreet and rational Choice, and the Seat of it is only in the Mind ; it consists in just and worthy Notions of the Deity, in Affections well governed, and a Course of Action agreeable to the Laws of Nature, and the purer Morality of the Christian Religion. Every Thing besides, under

under that Name and Appearance, is but a Piece of empty Form and Pageantry, a mere Outside without any real Worth and Significance.* It is plain from this Account of Religion, that the Methods of external Force or worldly Encouragement, can be of no Use to make Men sincerely Religious. To fine and imprison, to confiscate or discourage by civil Incapacity, or to use any Means, which are the Instruments of Civil Government, are perfectly insignificant to make a Convert. Would the Magistrate therefore bring over his Subjects to the Profession and Belief of his own Religion, 'tis necessary that he go another Way to Work ; he must endeavour to convince Dissenters by proper Arguments, and display the Evidences of his own Religion in a true Light. This is the true Method to recommend it to a rational Choice ; but then Care must be taken not to divert the Thoughts of an Enquirer from the Merits of the Cause ; the Project of a through Conversion will be spoil'd, by showing him Axes and Rods, and a terrible Appearance of Dragoons behind the Curtain : For as such worldly Terror can give no Evidence to the True Religion, they are likely to produce an external Compliance with it, upon Motives with which True Religion, not only has nothing to do, but indeed
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* See Hoadly's Defence of his Sermon concerning Christ's Kingdom ; his Answer to the Convocation, and the many other excellent Discourses of that learned Bishop upon the same Subject.

are perfectly inconsistent with a religious Conformity.

5. THERE are as many Arts to draw People off from a sincere and unbiass'd Regard to Truth, as there are Methods to bribe a Man's Compliance with a particular Sect, or to lay him under Discouragement for an honest Profession of what he believes; but there neither is nor can be any Way but one, to reclaim Men from an erroneous Belief.

LET us turn the Matter as often in our Thoughts as we please, we shall never be able to fall upon any Way to instruct a Man, and make him wiser, which does not furnish him with new or clearer Ideas, and so helps him to distinguish the True from the False: Other Methods of Conversion are Gothick and Barbarous, which a reasonable Man has no Notion of, and an honest Mind cannot understand. *

6. EVIDENCE is the only Ground of a rational Assent to any Religion, and is only produced by fair Instruction on one Hand, and a due Examination on the other. After we have considered the Reasons or Grounds of any Belief, we either receive it as true, or reject it as false, as we find our Ideas either agree or disagree; nor can there be any Assent worthy of a reasonable Creature (whatever be

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* The Spirit of Persecution in the Latin Church was in a great Measure owing to the Inundation of the Goths and Vandals, and other barbarous Nations from the North, as Mr. Burnet has observed in the Preface to his Translation of *Lactantius de mortibus persecutorum*.

the Object of it, Religion or any Thing else) which is not the Result of Knowledge. There can be no Knowledge without clear and distinct Ideas, and Men can have no Ideas of Religion, so as to compare them together, and perceive evidently, whether they agree or disagree, without a calm and deliberate Examination. Whatever Method therefore is used to profelyte Men to any Sect or Profession of Religion, if it promotes a serious and impartial Consideration, without any Regard to worldly Advantages, and the Favour of Men, if it tends to disengage us from Prejudice and Interest, and the Causes of a wrong Judgment, and to confine our Thoughts to the Merits of the Cause; such Methods of Conversion, I say, must be of excellent Use to promote True Religion, both in the Belief and Practice.

7. ON the other Hand, All that Authority or Religion, either Civil or Ecclesiastical, which makes it to be any Man's Interest to be of any particular Set or Profession, must naturally tend to hinder Consideration, or lead to an interested Submission to the Dictates of Men. And a Regard to Persons and Authority, whether the Civil Magistrate or the Clergy, must, in its Tendency, weaken the Principles of True Religion, in so far as it makes the Profession of it, rather a Compliance with human Laws and Establishment, than a Submission to the Laws of our Redeemer, and more the Effect of Interest and Ambi-

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Ambition, than a sincere Regard to a future Reward. *

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* This is indeed the Doctrine of the learned Bishop of Salisbury, for which he deserves the Acknowledgments of all who are Friends to the Protestant Religion. Tho' that excellent Person has vindicated the Rights of Conscience, with greater Abilities than any perhaps has done before; yet he has advanced no new Doctrine, concerning the proper Sanctions of Christ's Laws. On the contrary, the same has been taught by Mr. Mede, Mr. Hales, Dr. Barrow, Archbishop Tillotson, Bp. Blackhal, Dr. Sydal, Dr. Sherlock, and other eminent and learned Divines of the Church of England. See a Proof of this Agreement in a Pamphlet, intituled, *Farther Remarks on the Reverend Dr. Snape's 2d Letter to the Bishop of Bangor.*

It were not hard to confirm his Lordship's Doctrine by Authorities from the best Writers of Antiquity. Nothing can be more to the Purpose, than that fine Maxim, which Tertullian advances as the Sum of his Apology; *Non est religionis cogere religionem, quæ sponte suscipi debet, non vi, i. e.* It is not Religion to force Religion, which is a voluntary Thing. So Lactantius to the same Effect, *Lib. 5. Cap. 19. Non est opus vi & injuria, quia religio cogi non potest, verbis potius quam verberibus res agenda, ut sic voluntas destrigatur.* — And farther, *Nam si sanguine, si tormentis, si malo religionem defenderes velis, jam non defendetur illa, sed polluetur atque violabitur; Nihil est tam voluntarium quam religio, & quæ si animus sacrificantis aversus est, jam sublata, jam nulla est.* As these are Sentiments perfectly agreeable to Reason and the Christian Religion, 'tis a Pity that some of the Fathers, who lived under the Christian Emperors, should have adopted quite opposite Notions; and particularly the Bishop of Hippo, whose false Reasonings in Favour of Persecution are thoroughly confuted by Mr. Bayle, in the third Part of his Philolophical Commentary. In this Degeneracy, from the Judgment of the first Christians, we have an Instance of the Weakness of Mankind, who are as ready to persecute, when they have it in their Power, as they are ready to plead for Toleration and Liberty, when they ly at Mercy. Of the same Kind we have an Example in the ancient Pagans, who, as Bayle observes, seem to have had no Notion of what was due to tender Consciences, or the Absurdity of imposing Reli-

8. IN the same Manner we are to judge of external Force and Severity, as very incompetent Means to make Men through Proselytes to any Religion. A thinking Person will easily perceive the Force of a good Argument by its single Evidence ; and in this Method the Magistrate may chuse to deal with him : But if instead of going that Way to Work, he should think fit to be angry, and to threaten him with some great Severity ; the Fear to be ill used, may possibly suggest to him some Distinction or other to save his Life ; or if Deprivation be the Penalty, he may chuse rather to act a Part, than starve with a numerous Family. But what Honour could the Magistrate's Religion gain by such a feign'd Submission ? What inglorious Triumph would it be over the Weakness of Men, to conquer their Reason and Conscience, and to force them to commit an Act of the vilest Hypocrisy. On the other Hand, If a Man has Honesty enough to stand it out, and resolves to suffer all, rather than belie the Truth ; how nobly are the Virtues of Sincerity and Constancy rewarded, when the great Con-

Religion upon People, till the Christian Religion was established by Law, and themselves became Sufferers.

We learn from Burnet's Preface before cited, by what Steps the Spirit of Persecution, so contrary to the Spirit and Genius of the Gospel, came to prevail ; and how after the secular Power having interested himself in the Differences of Christians, so as to make Laws against Hereticks, particularly the Donatists, so wide a Breach was made in Christian Charity, as to admit all the unmerciful Severities, which were afterwards used by one Party in the Church against the other.

Conditions of Acceptance with God are made criminal by his own Vicegerent.

9. A late Defender of Conscience, and the Protestant Religion, has represented the Mischiefs of an undue Authority, where-ever it is lodged, in the clearest Light. There is so much Honesty in such a Conduct, that the sacred Character cannot appear in a more amiable View ; as nothing can be more worthy of a Christian and a Bishop, than a Defence of Liberty against all Ecclesiastical or Civil Invasions, and a Vindication of those Rights, which cannot be injur'd without the worst Consequences to the Christian Religion.

AUTHORITY to dictate and prescribe, under Pretence of defending Religion, does really hinder the Exercise of the noblest Virtues. Such a Power encourages Men to profess what they do not believe, and to be silent against their Conscience, and so tends to extirpate that Sincerity, which is the Life of Religion ; it turns Men from the true Motives of religious Practice to worldly Regards, and too often lays them under an irresistible Temptation, to forfeit the Rewards of another, for the Advantages of a present Life. In fine, Every Man must have learn'd the mischievous Influence of such an Authority, upon common Honesty and common Sense, who has lived in some Countries, or ever look'd into Church History.

10. 'T WERE endless to enumerate all the Mischiefs to Civil Government, all the Hindrances

rances to Publick-well, which flow from the same Source.

IF a Man suffers in his Conscience, either by being deprived of his Liberty to profess the True Religion, or required under Penalties to acknowledge a false Way of Worship, he is no longer obliged to live in that Country; he is no longer a Subject to an unjust Power, which, instead of defending his Liberty, makes the Exercise of it a Crime. In such a Case he is allowed, by the common Rights of Mankind, to remove to another Country; and if every Person under the same Grievance should use his Liberty, would not the Power of the Magistrate, by this Means, diminish with the Number of his Subjects? Would not the Wealth of the Kingdom dwindle into nothing? And what a poor desolate Territory must it be, if every Dissenter from the established Church, who thought himself a Sufferer, should seek Protection some where else? *

BUT the Event would be much more calamitous, if all the Dissenters in a Kingdom were oppressed by a rigorous Execution of penal Laws; what Insurrections and Conspiracies against the Government; what mutual Hatred and bitter Envy; what Interruption of Commerce and social Virtue; what Bloodshed and Civil War; in fine, what horrible Carn-

* See Puffendorf *de jure naturæ & gentium*, Amst. 1715, *Le Clerque Bibliothèque ancienne & moderne*, Tom. 3. Article

Carnage and Massacre must such a State of Things be attended withal? How necessarily must these Disturbances terminate sooner or later, in the Ruin of all the valuable Interests of Mankind, and at last in the Destruction of Society it self? We need not go far to demonstrate the mischievous Tendency of Religious Contentions, the Civil Wars of this Island and a neighbouring Country, being a lamentable Proof of the mischievous Tendency of an Authority overstrain'd.*

II. THE Integrity and Character of Clergymen will be very justly suspected, if they discover a great Fondness for Spiritual Rule and Authority. Ambition here, as it frequently does in other Cases, will defeat it self, and by aspiring to an undue Respect from the Laity, they will effectually lose what really belongs to them.

THE Generality of Men indeed are easily brought to believe what they do not understand, and are readily catch'd by a Trifle, when it is convey'd to them in a venerable Sound; but if such an easy and senseless Belief is for selfish Ends recommended under the Notion of a Christian Vertue, and the Foundation of all others; and on the contrary,

* Mr. Noodt observes, from Diodorus Siculus, that the Egyptians invented several Sorts of Religion to confirm their Empire, thinking this Difference of Opinion and Worship was like a Barrier, to hinder People's conspiring against the Government, and Julian the Emperor used the same Politick, as the same Author observes, from Ammianus Marcellinus, Lib. 22. Cap. 5.

trary, a Disposition to enquire and to see with their own Eyes, is branded with Heresy, Schism, or any other ill Character; what Judgment must the Thinking Part of Mankind make of such a Conduct? Will not every Man, who would not be thought either a Fool or a Knave, be willing to turn Free-thinker in Defence of Honesty and common Sense? Can a Man whose Understanding sets him above implicate Faith, easily avoid the impious Suspicion, that all such Faith is but another Word for Credulity, and that Religion, when founded upon it, must be the Offspring of Ignorance and Simplicity on one Hand, and of Roguery and Church Politicks on the other.

EXPERIENCE abundantly proves the Truth of this Observation. Priestcraft is a Word which has made a terrible Havock of Faith and good Morals, and Men have been apt to conclude that Religion was a meer human Contrivance to support and aggrandize the Clergy, a Project of Ambition to command the Reason and Conscience of Men. It had been well that some, whose Business it is to preach Self-denial to others, had not given Colour to so vile a Representation, that they had not expressed more Concern for certain Marks of Distinction, and selfish Notions, than for the Essentials of Christianity and the Protestant Religion.

12. WE are very sure however that the Christian Revelation has given no Handle to such Suspicions, no Ground of Pretence to that

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that Authority, which is the Occasion of such Reflections.

§ THE Scripture is every where full of Exhortations to charitable Forbearance, to Toleration of Dissenters, and an Indulgence of sincere, tho' erroneous Christians; an imposing Spirit is every where condemned, and the Right of every Man to judge for himself asserted, as being only subject to the Supreme Lawgiver; and sure it would be a hard Task to reconcile these and other Positions of the same kind, with an Authority in any Set of Christians to make Articles of Faith, or to prescribe and dictate to another.

BUT how needless a Thing would any such Authority be, either to make Scripture, or to determine the Sense of it.

UNDER what View soever we consider the Revelation of the New Testament, either as it contains Matters of Criticism or difficult Speculation, or plain Declarations with respect to Faith and Practice, meer Authority can find no Place.

MATTERS which require Skill and Learning to understand, nothing but Critical Skill and Ability can enable us to judge of; to dogmatize or decide here is a Piece of Presumption, which a Person must be very ignorant to be capable of it. The respect we owe to Age, sacred Function, or other Advantages, may dispose us to hearken to another we take

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§ See Dr. Hoadley's Answer to Dean Hare, where he vindicates some Passages of Scripture, which seem to make for Church Authority.

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to be wiser than our selves ; but these can add no Weight to a trivial Argument, or Lustre to a false Thought. No reasonable Humility can give what is doubtful, the Appearance of Probability, or advance what is barely probable to a Degree of Certainty ; Men of Learning and Abilities have erred in Matters of the greatest Consequence, and are as apt to be led by Passion and Interest as other Men.

As for those Matters which are in their own Nature incomprehensible, a vain Attempt to explain them, may probably make them more Mysteries, and an Explanation enforced by Authority cannot make them less.

As for those Points which are clearly revealed in Scripture, and sufficiently plain in themselves, there is no Need of authoritative Comments and Decisions to make them plainer.

IN fine, the Judgment of Men even of the Wisest, are so far from being certain Determinations of what is true or false, that they do not always express what is their real Opinion, and much less what it would be, if they were not seduced by the ordinary Causes of Error and Mistake.

13. TRUTH is a certain uniform Thing, incapable of varying according to the particular Interests and Passions of Men. If a Person therefore, in Defence of what he calls by that Name, is forc'd to depart from his known Principles, and so contradict in one Case what he asserts in another ; such a Contradiction shows that he is not Master of a consistent Scheme, and

and so must be as far from the Truth as he is from agreeing with himself. From such Inconsistency we may probably infer, that any Opinion is false, tho' it has no clear Connexion with any evident Propositions, or the Abstruseness of the Subject puts it beyond our Discovery; that is, altho' we cannot immediately prove the Notion to be absurd, we may be in a Condition to confute the Person who holds it.

I. IT will be then a sufficient Confutation of all Pretences to Authority in Religion, to dictate and prescribe, to which any Protestant lays Claim, if we prove that it implies a Contradiction to these Principles upon which the Reformation was founded; and that if such Authority had taken Place, (as there is the same Reason why it should in every Case, as in any one) we should have had no Protestant Religion; and if we can likewise make it appear, that Christianity stands upon the same Bottom, and first obtained in the World by the Right of private Judgment, the Argument for a Liberty to judge, independent of all Authority, will amount to the clearest Evidence; an Evidence which no Protestant, no Christian can disown, without running himself into an evident Inconsistency. *

THE Principles upon which the Reformation from Popery was begun and carried on, all Protestants must acknowledge: At this great and happy Revolution, all who protest-

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* See Dr. Hoadley's Answer to the Convocation.

ed against the Impositions of Popery, must have been convinced that every Man had an inviolable Right to judge for himself; for how could the Reformers otherwise pretend to shake off their Spiritual Bondage, or how could they justify their Proceedings upon another Principle?

IT is true Innovations had been introduced into Religion, which had been moulded to the Humour and Caprice of Men, and corrupted by the most ridiculous Mixtures. But what then, all this Change and Corruption had been brought in, and was defended by your Persons in Authority, and such as had all the Title to impose, which any Set of Ecclesiasticks could pretend to.

THERE was therefore nothing of all these Impositions upon the Principle of Church Authority, how unwarrantable soever they were, to which Lay-Christians were not obliged to submit; and a few Ecclesiasticks could not pretend to any Authority to reform the Church without her own Consent, that is, without a Majority at least of their own Order.

AT that Juncture the Clergy were divided in their Judgment concerning the Nature and Extent of Church Authority; some of them contended it was solely lodged in their own Body, others, by a Separation from the Church, plainly renounced all such Pretensions.

THE first according to their Principles adhered to the old Way of Worship and Doctrine, and condemned all Reformation, as an unwarrantable Innovation; whatever Opinion they

they might have of the Occasion and Necessity even of a Change, their Notions of Church Power deprived them both of the Right and Means to bring it about, nay made every Attempt of this kind, in Opposition to Authority, a Sort of Spiritual Rebellion.

As for the Bulk of the Clergy, no Body was to expect that Persons, who had found their Account in the Corruptions of Religion, would have much Zeal or Concern to reform them; their Interest obliged them to preserve the Work of their own Hands, and they had proceeded too far already to think of going back. Besides how could they do it with Honour? Had they been so indiscretely honest as to abrogate their own Laws, and give the Lye to their own Decisions, What had become of the Glorious Pretence to Infallibility? How could they have secured the Advantages of that Prerogative, and all the profitable Doctrines founded upon it, if they had gone about to prove to all the World (as they must have done by a Reformation) that they were not only as fallible as the Laity, but indeed had been oftner mistaken? Few Men are capable of such a Self-denial; few love Truth so well as to appear for it at so great Expence to themselves; and those Men, who had so long imposed upon Christians in the Name of the Lord, were of all Men least capable of such impolitick Sincerity.

THIS was the State of the Christian Church, after Spiritual Tyranny and Usurpation had reigned

reigned for some Hundreds of Years, and had been so long supported by the Ignorance and Credulity of the People on one Hand, and by the Biggotry and Interest of Princes on the other. At that Time, Authority proved a Protection to the grossest Corruptions, and made such a terrible Havock of natural and revealed Religion, of common Honesty and common Sense, that had not Providence interposed to rescue Religion out of the Hands of the Clergy, and preserved some dying Sparks of Vertue in the Hearts of a few, the whole Scheme of Christianity had been inverted, and turned into a mere Engine of Priestcraft and worldly Politics.

DISORDERS so gross could not but affect those, who had more Regard to Honesty and Religion than to the Church. Men were ashamed they had been so long imposed on, and their Credulity was for some Time at a Stand; a Stop was put to the Delusion in some Places, and the Right of the Laity vindicated by an open Separation from the Church. The Christian People, who had no Engagements from Interests, readily gave into a Reformation; awoken'd out of a long Dream they began to feel the Weight of their Chains, and weary of the nauseous Tale of implicate Faith and blind Obedience, they resolved to build upon a surer Foundation.

THE Scripture was, in all Protestant Creeds and Confessions, declared to be the only Rule of Faith, a Rule so compleat, as to

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contain all Things necessary to be done and believed, and so clear, as to be sufficiently intelligible in all the essential Points of Faith and Practice, by People of every Rank and Capacity.

THESE Declarations the Reformers seal'd with their Blood ; by which Testimony they demonstrated, That they sincerely meant to lay the Foundation of the Reformed Religion in the Right of Private Judgment, and that they were far from assuming to themselves an Authority, which they had lately disclaimed in others. Had they given the least Suspicion of such a Design, they had for ever made their own Justification impossible, and declared to all the World, that under the Pretext of Reformation, they intended nothing so much, as a new Sort of Popery under another Name.

THE first Protestants gave abundant Proof, that they could not pretend to the infallible Spirit of the Apostles ; for, according to the common Frailty of Mankind, they fell into very different Sentiments, both as to Doctrine, Government and Worship. But 'tis observable, that altho' they split into many Factions and Parties, and had very different Interests, (whatever Differences they had about the Nature of the Lord's Supper, about Liberty and Necessity, and Ecclesiastical Discipline, and other Matters) all their Churches agreed, in that singular Regard to the Scripture, by which they acknowledged it to be
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the Standard of Faith and Orthodoxy; they all pretended to build their own Opinions upon its sole Authority, and in all their Controversies, about Matters of greater or lesser Importance, appealed to it as the only Rule of Decision.

* The Church of *England* (as well as some other Protestant Churches) did indeed claim an Authority to settle Matters of Form and Decency; but then they expressly renounced all Power to make Articles of Faith, and to determine what the Scripture, the Rule of Faith, had left undetermined, and much more to make any Decision contrary to that Standard.

NOR was this a Piece of Self-denial peculiar to one or two Churches, where the Reformation might be supposed to be carried on with more Moderation, but appears from their several Confessions, to have been the Characteristick of every Protestant Society.

† HOW far their Conduct was always consistent with these Principles, of a piece with these

* See Article 20th. † There were some Disputes among the Clergy in Holland in some Assemblies, preparatory, as they call'd them, to the Synod of Dort, about the Judge of Controversy, and the Rule by which it was to be determined; by which it appears that some were willing to pay a Regard to human Compositions, which did not belong to them. Gomar, particularly so famous in the Synod of Dort, held, that tho' the Scripture was the *regula primaria*, or primary Rule; yet the Belgick Creed and Confession were to be accounted a Rule too, that is *pro secundaria*: And Bogerman, who was President to that Synod, added, That the Scriptures were to be interpreted agreeably to their Confession. According to these Opinions, when the States of Holland at the Hague 1506, required that

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these honest Appearances against Popery is not our Business to enquire ; so much is undoubtedly certain, that the very Essence of the Protestant Religion lies in a Disclaim of all Authority in one Set of Men, to impose their Decisions upon another : For all (according to the Principles of the Reformation) being provided with a Rule, containing all Things necessary, and so far sufficiently intelligible, to Persons of the meanest Capacity, and likewise a Right to judge of the true Sense of Scripture, every Man for himself ; all must be not only allowed, but obliged to determine
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the Ministers should revise the Belgick and Heidleberg Confessions, they declin'd it ; for which it would be hard to give a good Reason, which would not be an Imputation upon the Refusers, if we consider what loud and noisy Pretence to Authority has been made by some of another Denomination, we shall see more Occasion to vindicate the common Rights of Christians. One who reads the Controversy between Dr. Hoadly and his Adversaries, must immediately see what hard Shifts some People are reduced to, to reconcile the Liberty of Private Judgment with their Notions of Church Power ; how they fluctuate between Popery and the Protestant Religion ; and, ~~that the same thing might be allowed to the Romanists~~, are almost choaked with the Difficulty. Some indeed have not been at the Pains to disguise their Pretensions, but have honestly affirm'd, That the Church has Power to declare her own Sense in the Controversy, and to determine what Sense shall be received and professed for Truth by all her Members ; and roundly said, That the Sentence shall bind to Submission, tho' the Superiors may err in the Sentence. See Preface to Bp. Sparrow's Collections. Others have claimed so exorbitant a Power in the Remission of Sins, that a modest Person would be ashamed of them, and the more so, that their Doctrine has not the least Countenance from those excellent Men, (some of whom were Martyrs for the Protestant Religion) who composed the Common Prayer Book, and the XXXIX. Articles.

in the Use of those Means which Providence affords him, and by that Assistance, which is promised to the sincere Enquirer, what he ought to do and believe, without the least Dependence upon Authority, either Civil or Ecclesiastick.

“ BY the Religion of Protestants (says one who perfectly understood it) I do not understand the Doctrine of *Luther* nor *Calvin*, nor *Melancthon*, nor the *Confession* of *Augusta* or *Geneva*, or the *Catechism* of *Heidleberg*, or the *Articles* of the Church of *Engband*; no, nor the Harmony of the Protestant *Confessions*; but that wherein they all agree, and which they all subscribe with greater Harmony, as a perfect Rule of Faith, that is the Bible, the Bible I say, the Bible is the Religion of Protestants.”

THAT this Judgment has been confirmed by the concurring Opinion of all, who have had a Name for Learning or Attachment for the Protestant Religion, might be easily proved. But as Authority can add no Evidence, where a Matter is already abundantly plain, I shall only observe what some will reckon more to the Purpose than a thousand other Authorities; namely, that this is the Doctrine of that Orthodox and judicious System of Doctrine, the *Westminster Confession*, the *Larger* and *Shorter Catechism*.

2. IN Consequence to the setting up the Scripture as the only Rule of Faith, all Protestant Churches have disclaimed Infallibility as a presumptuous Pretence. Self-love indeed

deed disposes Men to believe that they are seldom or never mistaken ; yet all Protestants are ready to confess they are liable to that Frailty : Upon which Account, a Pretence to make their own Decisions a Rule to others, must be very unaccountable in Men of this Profession : For what Shew of Reason can People have to dictate to others, who are not above the Errors of Humanity themselves ? A Church, who has secured to herself a Patent of Infallibility, may make what Demands she thinks fit upon the Faith and Obedience of Christians, and thunder out *Anathemas* against Dissenters ; but the same Conduct will be very unreasonable in Persons, who are so far from claiming any such extraordinary Privilege, that they must found all that Shadow of Authority, which they have or can pretend to upon their Separation from the only Christian Church, by which they disclaimed it in others.

3. A singular Regard for the Holy Scripture, as the only Rule of Faith, I have already observed to be the Badge of a Protestant Church.

Now the sacred Writings would be unworthy the Wisdom and Goodness of their Author, and very improper to direct Men in the Road to Heaven, (the great Design for which they were composed) if either their Divine Authority, or genuine Sense in Points of necessary Belief or Practice were above the Reach of ordinary Men. And upon this

Principle an Authority in some Men to judge for others, (if any Set of Men had it) would be Contradiction to the Sufficiency of the sacred Scriptures : Besides, it would be perfectly needless, unless we suppose what is certainly a very great Paradox, that a Lay-man, who is free from Prejudice and Passion, and assisted by the Spirit of God, may, notwithstanding be incapable to understand what is plainly and abundantly revealed ; for if ordinary Men, with these Advantages, could judge of the true Sense of Scripture with sufficient Certainty, to what Purpose should others be extraordinarily qualified to understand it for them.

THESE and other Principles of the Reformed Religion make it evident, that there can be no Pretension to the Authority of dictating, which does not undermine the Grounds upon which it stands, and can only be defended.

4. BUT this is not all, If Men had been swayed by the Dictates of Superiors, we should not only have had no Protestant Religion, but indeed no Christianity.

'TIS no Disparagement to modern Believers to affirm, that the primitive Christians were every whit as wise, and a great Deal more in Earnest. The Grounds these went upon in receiving Christianity must be eternally good ; and if it was no Crime 1700 Years ago to be determin'd by the Evidence of Truth, without any Regard to Authority, and

and in Opposition to all that was call'd by that Name, it can be no Crime to act the same Part now. We must chuse one Side, or other, either condemn the first Christians for spiritual Rebellion, and an unwarrantable Use of Liberty, or justify such, who, in the same Circumstances, make the same Use of it. Every Body knows, how our Saviour and his Followers were treated by the Church of the *Jews*: They bore the *Anathemas* of the *Synagogue*, and the Condemnation of the *Sanhedrim* their supreme Judicature; while the *Scribes* and *Pharisees*, like some modern Doctors, pretended that the common People were incompetent Judges of our Saviour's Mission, and excommunicated Believers, because they opposed their own Private Judgment to that of their Teachers.

Now, if we consider the Matter well, the Sentence had all the Weight which human Authority could give it: 'Tis plain, that the *Scribes* and *Pharisees*, by our Saviour's Allowance, sat in *Moses* Chair; and every Body knows what Prerogative and Authority belong'd to the *Jewish* High Priest in Matters of Religion. No modern Teacher can pretend to such a clear Text from the New Testament, for a Submission to his Judgment, which a *Jewish* Doctor could produce from the Old, for the same Authority. In this Way of Reasoning, if none but authorized Interpreters could pretend to understand the *Jewish* Prophecies, it was to no Purpose for our Saviour to alledge them: His
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Miracles were no Proof of a Divine Mission, or that he was the *Messiah*, till the Men in Authority had determined what was a true Miracle, or how far our Saviour's amounted to a Proof of his Pretensions; nay indeed, these extraordinary Works, as great and good as they were, were Arguments against him, when the *Rabbi's* ascribed them to a Collusion with the Devil. If our Saviour quoted Texts of the Old Testament, the *Pharisees* appealed to Tradition; and must not their Alledgance carry the Point, if the People were not allowed to be Judges? What could be more plausible than all this, upon the Principle of Church Authority, to prove that our Saviour was an Im—r, and all who followed him guilty of a damnable Schism? Now it was Time for the *Jewish* Church to look to herself, and to throw about her Spiritual Weapons: Now, if ever, she must excommunicate in Self-defence, and cry out, *The Temple, the Temple*. Mean while, what could the poor Schismatics alledge in their own Defence? What could they say to clear themselves from the Charge of Heresy and Schism, which every modern Opposer of Church-Authority would not alledge with equal Reason, and as good a Grace in his own Justification?

THE Zeal of some for the Rights and Authority of the Clergy, I am afraid, is by this Time sufficiently inflamed; but I am sure nothing has been alledged, which can detract from the utmost Regard, which sober Persons can

can bestow upon Men in that Character ; every Body is ready to own, who values the Interests of Religion, that wise and good Men deserve a particular Esteem, who make it their Business to promote it, by their Teaching and Example; and that the utmost Honour is due to the sacred Character, when it is distinguished by a disinterested Concern for Religion and Liberty: But a Lay-man may say it, without any just Offence, That the true Honour of the Clergy cannot lye in any Submission to their Judgment, which hinders a free Enquiry, or turns the Laity aside from the Sincerity of the Gospel ; nor can any Clergyman judge otherwise, who has no other Design but to make Men good.

THE Drift of this long Discourse any Man must perceive to be perfectly innocent, namely, to vindicate the Right of every Christian to judge for himself, and to follow the Result of that Judgment, and to shew that there can be no Authority in any Set of Men inconsistent with that Liberty, that is, to hinder or discourage the Use of it.

To make good this Proposition, I have showed that there is no Precept or Example either in the Old or New Testament, which can oblige any Man to submit his Judgment or Conscience to the Dictates of another : On the contrary, that the whole Strain of our Saviour's Doctrine, and the Method which the Apostles took to convert Unbelievers, looks another Way, as plainly supposing that no
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Person was obliged to own their Mission, without the most authentick Proof of their Authority, and after a fair and deliberate Examination.

IT has been proved by a Variety of Reflections upon the Writings of the Primitive Christians (who may be supposed to understand Religion, as well, if not better, than their Successors) that these Books, however valuable, can afford us no certain Rule of Decision in Matters of Controversy, and that the Laity are neither obliged to understand them, nor to be determined by the Judgment of others who do.

ENOUGH has been advanced then to prove that private Judgment is not to be over-ruled by the Authority of later Decisions, and that all Pretences of this kind, in modern Ecclesiasticks, are not to be regarded. And likewise,

THAT no Society of Christians, or Majority in any Church, has any Right to determine what the rest ought to believe, and that every Society ought to admit or exclude from her Communion only those who are, or are not qualified, according to the Gospel-Prescription.

THAT as Heresy and Schism properly signifies a Departure from the Scripture as the Rule of Faith, and the Law of Charity as the Rule of Practice, no Man ought to be frightened by such Bugbear Words, from following his private Judgment, in joining this or that

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Society, in leaving one or going over to another Church.

THAT the Power of the Civil Magistrate, according to the best Account of the Ends of Society, and the Origin of Government, cannot extend to Matters of pure Conscience and Religion, and that every Man is in a State of Nature with respect to another, as to the Choice of the proper Means to be eternally happy, that is, as much at his own Disposal, after the Institution of Laws and Government, as he can be supposed to have been before.

WE have shewed moreover from the Nature of Religion, that the Interposition of civil Authority in Matters of this Kind, by annexing Rewards or Discouragement to this or that particular Profession of it, has too plain a Tendency to destroy the Motives of true Religion, and either to produce an Indifference to all Religions, or at least to make Men Hypocrites in the Profession of the true.

IN fine, all Power and Authority, wherever we suppose it to be lodged, inconsistent with the natural Right of every Man to judge for himself, and to follow his own Judgment, implies a Contradiction to the Principles upon which a Reformation from Popery could be either brought about or defended, is too plain a setting up of one Infallibility in place of another, and an Impeachment of the Clearness and Sufficiency of the only acknowledged Rule of Faith, in all Protestant Churches.

IN a Word, as the Christian Religion first obtained in the World by the Right of private Judgment, if Men had been determined by Authority, we should not only have had no Reformation, but indeed no Christianity.

THESE are Principles which no Christian or Protestant can be under any reasonable Temptation to deny or be ashamed of; nay, which are necessary to be held in order to support these Characters, and to make his Profession consistent with it self.

AFTER all that can be said for Religious Liberty, the guilty Excesses which some have run into under this Pretence, are too notorious to be concealed, too criminal to admit of Excuse. A Person who is in earnest, and considers Religion as a Divine Institution, must regard every Departure from its known Laws every Approach to a Licentious Freedom, as a Hinderance to his present and future Happiness. Under this Notion every Opinion or Practice will come, which is either contrary to the Honour we owe the Author of Religion, or inconsistent with a hearty Belief of it, or even tends to lessen a certain Character and Profession, which is absolutely necessary to the Support both of Religion and Society. To treat Men so distinguished with ill Manners, to make a Jest of their good Instructions, or to endeavour to make so useful a Function appear ridiculous, are very unwarrantable Abuses of Liberty, which no Christian, no good

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Member of Society, can either be guilty of or excuse.

BUT the Excess is carried much further, (and yet an easy Consequence) when to avoid the Extreme of Credulity, Men run headlong into Infidelity: And when to free themselves of the Imputation of implicate Faith, they find no other Way but to believe nothing at all.

SUCH a dangerous Use of Liberty, is very proper to tempt People who love Religion to surrender all into the Hands of the Clergy; but Christian Liberty is not to be parted with, because some are foolish enough to abuse it. 'Tis possible that a sincere Enquirer after Truth may avoid these dangerous Extremes, which have no necessary Connexion with every Man's making the best of his Bible, and seeing with his own Eyes. The Divine Assistance is sufficient and always ready to steer us by those fatal Rocks; or if we suppose that a Person, thro' human Weakness, or certain Prejudices, consistent with Christian Sincerity, should fall into any important Error, either in Judgment or Practice, should he thereby incur the Displeasure of the Clergy, or the ill Opinion of a whole Society of Lay-Christians; such an Error would not however affect his Acceptance with God, or endanger his Eternal Happiness; he may have the same Hopes as before, if his Sincerity is the same, and the same good Conscience, tho' his Judgment concerning Matters not essential, be entirely different.

And that this is no singular Opinion, we may judge by two Passages, which have all the Authority which good Sense and the Character of the Authors can give them. ' Men are to
 ' use their best Endeavours, (says an Eminent
 ' Defender of the Protestant Religion) to be-
 ' lieve the Scriptures in the true Sense, and to
 ' live according to it. This, if they perform,
 ' as I hope, many on all Sides do truly and sin-
 ' cerely, it is impossible but they should believe
 ' aright in all Things necessary to Salvation;
 ' that is, in all Things which appertain to the
 ' Covenant between God and Men in Christ,
 ' for so much is not only plainly but frequently
 ' contained in Scripture. And believing right
 ' touching the Covenant, if they for their Parts
 ' perform the Condition required of them,
 ' which is sincere Obedience, why should they
 ' not expect that God will perform his Promise,
 ' and give them Salvation? For as for other
 ' Things which lye without the Covenant, and
 ' are therefore less necessary, if by Reason of
 ' the seeming Conflict between Scripture and
 ' Reason and Authority on the one Side, and
 ' Scripture, Reason and Authority on the other,
 ' or if by Reason of the Variety of Tempers,
 ' Abilities, Educations, and unavoidable Preju-
 ' dices, whereby Mens Understandings are va-
 ' riously form'd and fashion'd, they do embrace
 ' several Opinions, whereof some must be erro-
 ' neous; to say that God will damn them for
 ' such Errors, who are Lovers of him and Lov-

ers of Truth, is to rob Man of his Comfort,
and God of his Honour.'

To the same Purpose says a worthy Bi-
shop of the Church of *England*.—— 'But
when you are secure of your Integrity before
God, and of your sincere Disposition to search
after his Will, and to receive the Truth in the
Love of Truth, whensoever and from whom-
soever offered, this will I confess lead (as it
ought all of us) not to be afraid of the Ter-
rors of Men, and the vain Words of regular
and uninterrupted Successions, authoritative
Benedictions, Nullity or Validity of God's Or-
dinances to the People upon Account of Ni-
ceties and Trifles, or any other like Dreams,
or indeed any Thing but what he who is
your Lord and Master and Judge hath de-
clared that your Salvation shall depend upon.'

To the one only God, Father, Son and
Holy Ghost, be all Honour, &c.



DIS-



DISCOURSE III.

On the Causes of a Wrong Judgment.



HERE are other Causes of Neglect to enquire into Religion, besides an unreasonable Submission to the Dictates of Authority ; this guilty Negligence is too often the Effect of certain Motives, which cannot be so easily excused : A Laziness proceeding from the Love of sensual Pleasure, or an eternal Hurry of Business, or certain unexamined Prejudices in Favour of Impiety, bred by ill Company, and supported by a good Share of Pride, very frequently produce the same Effect : But the most general of all Causes is an Interest that there should be no Religion, acquired by a Course of irreligious Practice, and the most successful, as it effectually deters People from an Enquiry,

quiry, which can yield them nothing but an uneasy Reflection upon the past, and ill-boding Apprehensions of the future.

THESE are Immoralities of so high a Nature, that indeed they are incapable of any Aggravation: But there are other Motives to neglect Religion not altogether so criminal, which however are no less prevalent with the weak and unthinking Part of Mankind, than those are with the vicious and immoral; namely, Ignorance and Enthusiasm.

By these Instances of Weakness and Immorality, Men are either betrayed into a Habit of Thoughtlessness and Inattention, so as never to think of Religion at all; or if they sometime allow it a few transient Thoughts, are so byass'd by Affection and Prejudice, that they are turned out of the Road of a true and impartial Examination.

I. ALL Christians are ready to acknowledge a Divine Influence upon the Minds of Men: By *Enthusiasm* therefore we are not to understand the Opinion of any such Assistance, but only such a groundless and immeasurable Expectance of it, as inclines a Man to father upon Almighty God every idle Whim of his own, or to ascribe to him what is the mere natural Product of his own Reflection. People of a Religious Turn, and a certain Cast of Temper, have been always subject to this Extravagance, as Persons of a nice and deli-

Enthusiasm
one Cause of
Neglect to en-
quire into Re-
ligion.

delicate Complexion are apt to have something irregular in their Way of Conception. When these abandon themselves to a Religious Melancholy, Imagination commonly gets the Better of their Reason, and their Brain being overheated, is apt to produce a Thousand wild and phantastick Conceits ; these are entertain'd with the Fondness Men usually have for their own Resveries ; and Self-love, strengthened with an Enthusiastick Fancy, is sure to ascribe to an immediate Inspiration from above, whatever a warm Imagination recommends. We may be sure, that a Person under this Delusion is not a little vain of the fancied Privilege, which is not only a glorious Mark of Distinction between himself and ordinary People, but likewise gratifies his Ease by saving him the Pains of Reasoning and Enquiry. In this Manner the *Enthusiast* becomes straight infallible, and places himself so high in his own Imagination, that he looks down with Contempt upon others, who have no privileged Fancies. No Wonder then, that instead of putting himself to the needless Trouble to consider and examine, he pretends to a Right to impose and dictate, especially to those who have got no higher than fallible Reason, and the ordinary Assistances of Heaven.

BUT here it may be suggested, May not the Father of Spirits inspire Men in such a Manner, as to supersede the Use of their Faculties, and leave no Place for Reason and En-

Enquiry ? To which we may answer, That such an Inspiration is not impossible ; but then this Concession makes nothing to prove, that every Fancy must be the Fruit of Inspiration ; God may sometimes enlighten the Mind in an extraordinary Manner, and yet leave a Man the Use of his Reason in the common and ordinary Methods of Illumination. This was very often the Case of Men divinely assisted both under the Old and New Testament ; and 'tis generally allow'd, that the usual Intercourse between God and Men now a-days, does not hinder or suspend the Exercise of Reason : Nay, Experience makes it evident, seeing we every Day see Persons assisted by the Spirit of God, argue in the same Manner, and from the same Principles, as other People do, who have no such Assistance ; whence it appears, that Illumination gives a Man no new Ideas, but only makes those clearer, which he has already attain'd by Sense and Reflection, and is rather an Improvement of natural Reason, than the Creation of a new Faculty.

BUT let us suppose that Christians were allowed an Illumination so extraordinary, as to make their Reasoning Powers perfectly useless, as it cannot be denied, that some were so favoured under the *Jewish* Dispensation ; no Man however could be sure that he had this Inspiration, without the Evidence of some external Sign, much less could he satisfy

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others that he had it, without the same miraculous Proof.

1. A Man could have no reasonable Assurance of this without external Proof. A warm overweening Fancy might indeed produce a very great Confidence; but mere Strength of Opinion proves nothing, not so much that a Proposition is true, much less that it is inspired from above. Men, who are in Love with their own Conceits, may be very much assured, that they are true and reasonable; But if every Man was in the Right, who was entirely confident that he was, no Man either is or indeed can be in the Wrong, but he who has the Sense to doubt whether he was so or not?

'T IS very true, there are some self-evident Truths, that is, the Terms of certain Propositions may have so necessary and evident a Connection, that every Man of common Sense must immediately perceive it: But this is far from being the Case here; a Man under the Power of Religious Fancy, cannot say that he evidently perceives that to be the Effect of Inspiration, and that the strange Conceits, which he fathers upon the Almighty, could proceed from no natural Cause; for then he must suppose that it implies as evident a Contradiction to the Nature of Things, that the Ideas he is so fond of should come from no greater Height than his own overheated Brain, as it is to suppose that twice two should make either three or five.

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BUT if the Conceit which hits a Man carried all that Evidence along with it, there would be no more Need of Inspiration to produce it, than there is a Necessity of being inspired to perceive the Truth of a self-evident Proposition. For 'tis very plain, no Body would want Illumination to know a Thing to be true, of which it was impossible for him to be ignorant, as soon as he turn'd his Thoughts that Way.

THE Matter therefore stands thus, whoever discards his Reason as an useless Thing, upon a Presumption that he is divinely inspir'd, acts with the greatest Rashness, because his being inspired is no self-evident Truth; and therefore he cannot attain to the Assurance of it, but by a fair Enquiry; or if the Fancies he ascribes to Inspiration were self-evident Truths, then Inspiration would be altogether needless, and highly unworthy of that Being, who does nothing in vain.

LET us suppose that a Man comes to know that Christianity is the only True Religion by a Divine Assistance, which leaves no Place for Reasoning; yet it is plain he could not attain to a reasonable Assurance that he was inspired, otherwise than by some evident Proofs, of which his Reason must be Judge.

AND this Proof must be sensible, or an external Effect which he evidently perceives by his Senses; because he could not otherwise distinguish between the natural Operations of his own Reason, and that Assent which

is produced by immediate Inspiration; the Action of our Minds by which we assent to the Truth of any Proposition being the same, whether we are divinely inspired or not.

As such an Inspiration could not be otherwise proved than by a Miracle, so if it could it would be perfectly needless, or to no Purpose, if we suppose that Religion is not destitute of Evidence or rational Proofs sufficient to produce an Assent to it.

AND every Body, who owns such a Thing as a Divine Revelation, must confess that there are certain undoubted Characters of Truth, by which it may be distinguish'd from every Imposture, because a Revelation without such Proofs would be really as none at all, to every Body who was resolved not to believe at a Venture.

THE proper Use of our Reason in Religion must be to enquire after the Characters of the true, that by that Evidence we may certainly distinguish it from every Pretender; the Knowledge of these being the only Ground of a rational Assent. And suppose a Man was never so much persuaded of the Truth of the Christian Religion; yet if his Persuasion was founded upon something else than Evidence, if it was supported by nothing but a mighty Confidence either in his own Sufficiency, or that of his Teachers; it is plain that Persuasion, instead of proving that he was inspired, would demonstrate that he was a Slave either to Self-conceit or Authority.

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† As we are not rashly to believe that we our selves are inspired, so we must take Care not to submit to another's Judgment upon a meer Pretence to Inspiration.

WHEN any Revelation was vouchsafed under the Old Testament, it was always accompanied with some miraculous Appearance, whereby the Prophet or inspired Person was made as sure as his Senses could make him, that it was a real Transaction, and no Scene of Fancy or Effect of Imposture. This might be proved by several Examples, which it would be needless to alledge.

IN the general it deserves Observation, that the sacred Books give us a very concise Account of some Matters of Fact; and therefore, tho' this Particular is not always mentioned, we cannot infer from that Silence, that some Revelations were not attended with an external Evidence; so far at least we are sure that good Men frequently demanded that Satisfaction, and were as often gratified; an Argument that the Request was not unreasonable, and that Men could not be rationally assured in another Way, seeing the Wise God, who does nothing in vain, would not have otherwise comply'd with it.

THE Necessity of such a Proof, will further appear, if we consider, that there are many Ways in which Men may arrive at Persuasion without Evidence.

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† See Lock on human Understanding, concerning Enthusiasm.

BESIDES the Power of Imagination, which works very effectually upon weak Minds, the Scripture assures us, that there are certain invisible Beings, who have Malice and Power enough to inspire Men with a Religious Delusion : But whatever be the Cause of it, whether it be natural or inspired, we are sure that Abundance of either Sex are apt to entertain their own Conceits, without taking the Trouble to examine them ; and that Men are by a frequent Enthusiasm led into a Mistake, which promises Certainty without Proof, and Assurance without Examination.

A Method of attaining to Certainty so honourable and so easy, which at the same Time flatters the Pride of Men, and gratifys their Sloth, cannot miss to be very acceptable to all the conceited and unthinking, who are much the greater Part of Mankind.

BUT let us grant that meer Fancy and Confidence were sufficient Grounds of Assent, and that a Man might be reasonably assured of something, for he knows not what Reason ; What could that Assurance signify to convince another ? Nothing but Argument or external Evidence can be a sufficient Proof to another, that God has revealed his Will to me ; and if I cannot convince him either by Reason or Miracles, he is not obliged to believe me, he must wait till the Revelation made to me is confirmed by another to him ; and so every Revelation would want another

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to prove it; and therefore would be incapable of any Proof at all.

THESE Considerations have some Weight to show that Men are not to trust to their own Chimeras, but are bound to make the best Use of their Understanding in judging what is true and false in Religion.

ANOTHER Cause of Neglect to enquire into Religion, and a very general one, is Ignorance. There are many whose Minds are so shut against all reasonable

Ignorance another Cause of Neglect to enquire into Religion.

Thoughts, that nothing of an Argument can have Access to them; such People being only conversant about the Objects of Sense, their Apprehension cannot without a Difficulty be stretched beyond them: Mean Time, their Prejudices against Religion every Day increase, and at last settle in an obstinate Aversion.

THIS unreasonable Disgust at Religion is so prevalent in some People, that they solace themselves in an absurd Contempt of it, while they know little or nothing of the Matter.

WAS their Ignorance accompanied with Humility, or a Disposition to learn, it would deserve Compassion; but when an unthinking Person values himself upon his Want of Thought, and tho' he never was at the Trouble of examining, *Is wiser in his own Conceit, than seven Men that can render a Reason*; such a Composition of Ignorance and Vanity, is the proper Object of Scorn, and is enough to make a Man

Man very ridiculous, in a Matter of lesser Importance than Religion.

To despise Religion without understanding it, is however too often the Fault of Men, otherwise of good Understanding. The Ignorance of the Vulgar does not carry them to such a Pitch of Impertinence; these are content to neglect, without pretending to despise what they do not understand. The Heathen Philosophers were a notable Example of this Insolence, nothing appeared to them more ridiculous than the Doctrine of Christ, but the same Persons who made a Jest of the Mysteries of Christianity, were perfect Strangers to the Facts on which it is founded; their Historians have either passed over these important Matters, or left such imperfect and mistaken Accounts of them, as show their Negligence more effectually than their Silence could have done. The *Athenians*, who were the politest People of *Greece*, and had a great Itch of Novelty, showed by the cold Reception they gave the Apostle, that the Doctrine of Christ was nothing they had any Curiosity to know. But these Instances of Ignorance are less surprising, seeing the *Jews* themselves, who lived upon the Place, did not give themselves the Trouble of examining into the Pretensions of this new Religion. There are no Accounts of our Saviour or his Doctrine in the Writers of this Country, which we certainly know to be genuin, which is the more remarkable, that the Fame of Jesus Christ and his

his Miracles had spread far and wide, and * *Philo* an Inquisitive Author who lived about that Time, has left us so many Discourses on the Old Testament, in which he had a fair Occasion to speak of the Christian Religion. But we need not bring Examples of Ignorance from Antiquity † or remote Countries, when

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* See Clerk's Causes of Incredulity.

† Note, It is very well known how ignorant the Heathens were of the true Religion, both before and after the Coming of Jesus Christ. The Jews they considered as a superstitious narrow-soul'd People; and so were little disposed to give themselves the Trouble of examining into the Authority and Divine Original of the Law of Moses; besides the then odious Singularity of their Manners, and Zeal against Idolatry confirmed them in that Aversion; not to say that the sacred Books were writ in a Language they did not understand, so that before the Translation of the Septuag. was published, that is, about 100 Years after the last Jewish Prophet, the Heathens had little Access to be instructed in the Law of Moses. About the Coming of our Saviour, tho' a Passage had been opened into Judæa, long before by the Roman Arms, and the sacred Writings had been 300 Years in a Language which was universally understood; yet we find the same Ignorance of the Jewish Religion prevailed, and the same Neglect to enquire into it. For which Reason, altho' the Miracles wrought by our Saviour and his Apostles, had made his Religion sufficiently famous in Judea; yet as that was a Country of small Extent, and the Romans little inclined to inform themselves in foreign Affairs, (despising other Nations as barbarous) we find their Historians were very much Strangers to these Facts, on which the Christian Religion is founded, in so much that they never speak on this Article without betraying their Ignorance. *Tacitus* for Example, tho' a grave Historian, confounds the Jews with the Christians, as his Interpreters have shown, and *Suetonius* did not so much as know the Pronunciation of our Saviour's Name, see *Sueton.* in *Claud.* c. 25. And *Tertullian* upbraids the Heathens with this Ignorance in his Apolog. c. 3.

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so many Christians of our own are equally ignorant of the true Religion with the *Pagan* Idolaters, and the Followers of *Mahomet*, and are as much wanting in just Apprehensions of it, as they are generally in a Christian Practice.

'Tis true the most illiterate Unbeliever is willing to avoid the Imputation of Ignorance, and would appear to act meerly from Conviction. (every Man of Sense being ashamed to reject Religion before he understands it) But if the Reasons he alledges against it are evidently weak, and such as could have no Weight with him in a Matter of lesser Importance; it is not to be thought that such a Person has reasoned himself out of his Religion. All that
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Nam nec nominis certa est notitia penes vos. See Lactantius, Lib. 4. de vera sapunt. c. 7. Par. 5.

As for the Greeks they were a Supercilious Nation; had all the World in Contempt, and were equally heedless to what passed in foreign Countries. Their Philosophers (as those of *Rome*) were very little versed in the sacred Writings, or concerned to enquire into the true Religion. The Novelty of the Christian Doctrine might occasion some Reflections and Enquiries, but the most inquisitive were not at Pains to examine the Matter nicely; so *Origen* complains of *Celsus*, (a learned *Epicurean*) that notwithstanding his Pretences to know the Jewish and Christian Religion, he understood very little of either, *Lib. 2. cont. Celsum*, and *Justin Martyr* offered to expose the Ignorance of *Crescens* the *Cynick* (who disputed against the Christian Religion) in the Presence of the Emperor *Marcus Aurelius*. See his Apology.

The Ignorance of the Heathens is indeed frequently mentioned by the Apologists for Christianity, who required no Favour of their Adversaries, but that they would allow Religion a fair Hearing, and suspend their Judgment till they had done so; as *Jenkyns* observes on the Christian Religion, *Vol. 2. p. 477.*

can be said is, the Man has taken up with an ignorant Prejudice, which he is content to make the best of; Affection has given him a Bias to one Side of the Argument, and there is nothing less than Conviction at the Bottom, tho' he may pretend to it, as the best and most honourable Excuse of his Infidelity.

L A Z I N E S S and Inattention are necessary Causes of Ignorance; Imperfections which commonly attend either an easy and prosperous State of Life, or a Multiplicity and Hurry of Business.

Laziness the Cause of Ignorance.

A Man of Pleasure, possessed of a Thousand entertaining Objects, readily contracts an Indolence of Mind, if he is not a Lover of the Sciences, or finds other Work for the Exercise of it. Such a Temper not only indisposes a Man for serious Thinking, but indeed renders every Attempt this Way intolerable: The finest Speculations of Reason and Philosophy, are unwelcome Interruptions of his Ease; and nothing engages his Attention, but something which pleases a favourite Passion, and the most trifling Amusement of this kind, even the Conversation of a ——— is preferred to the most elegant Satisfaction of the Mind.

B U T of all the severer and manly Improvements of Thought, that of Religion is most irksome to one of this Genius, as being most opposite to a careless unthinking Temper.

L A Z Y People, that is, all whose Circumstances make them very easy, and are resolved to have nothing to do, commonly neglect Religion and are indifferent about it; their Sloth makes them ignorant, and their Ignorance either Scepticks or Unbelievers; as a Man who never look'd into the Elements of *Euclid*, cannot be a Mathematician, or receive the least Pleasure from the most beautiful Theorem; mean Time an easy Temper makes their Company perfectly agreeable, and gives them no small Satisfaction in the Contempt of these great Enemies of Repose and Politeness, Study and Religion.

To urge People of this Sort with the best Reasons, is so much Pains thrown away; Men in these Circumstances are neither willing nor capable to perceive the Weight of Argument; Sloth is too powerful a Disease to yield to the Force of an ordinary Remedy, and nothing less than a severe Affliction is sufficient to rouse them into Thought and Attention; for having no Thoughts or Desires for Reason and good Advice to work upon, 'tis impossible for them to mind Religion in earnest, till either Pain of Body or Mind drive away the Lethargy; and by making new Impressions convince them, that sensual Pleasure is not the sole or principal End of Life.

T H E Rich and easy are not the only Persons who owe their Infidelity or Neglect of Religion to Inattention. These unhappy Men, whose Avarice or Indigence engage them in a

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constant Hurry of Thought, must be equally guilty in this Kind; the Fatigue of other Cares puts their Mind out of Breath, and the dull, tho' profitable Labour of making Money, indisposes for an Enquiry after Truth, as it makes them glad of every Opportunity to be easy: Religious Thoughts are coldly entertained by People of this Sort, like unwelcome Visitants they neither return often, nor stay long.

ADD to this, that their Minds are not capacious enough to receive other Cares, besides those which their Passions or Necessities impose upon them. Talk to the busy Part of Mankind about a Project of Trade, or an Affair of Interest, their Apprehension outruns your Discourses, and immediately chimes to all you say; but if your Subject be something which requires another Set of Ideas to understand it, you only grate their Ears with barbarous Sounds, which set their Spirits a moving in unbeaten Tracts, and occasion the same Weariness which People are subject to, when they travel in a strange Country, and an unknown Road.

IN order to avoid every Approach to this unhappy Disposition of Mind, it will be fit for every Man to chuse proper Occasions of abstracting his Thoughts from the Cares of Business and the Pleasures of Life, that by this Means he may accustom his Mind to breathe a freer Air in the Contemplations of those Objects, which may purify and exalt it, and by
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such a Practice may grow by Degrees into a Relish of serious Thinking.

AN Advice which every one must see to be reasonable, and for his Interest by a very easy Reflection. For what Pleasure or Advantage can any Man propose (setting aside Consequences) by such a Self-indulgence as renders him incapable of right Reason and calm Reflection; on the other Hand, an Ability to form a true Judgment in a Matter of Concernment, must yield a thinking Person a vast Satisfaction; to say nothing of the Entertainment of an Ingenious Mind, in seeing to the Bottom of a Difficulty, and to the End of an intricate Scheme; a Pleasure which affects us the more, that 'tis the Purchase of Labour, as well as the highest Improvement of our noblest Faculty; a Pleasure as far preferable to lazy Indolence and Noise of Business, as the most elegant Satisfaction of the Mind is more eligible than a meer Want of Pain, or a constant Hurry and Distraction of Thought.

Fear sometimes the Cause of a Neglect to enquire into Religion.

FEAR arising from a Conscience of Guilt, sometimes betrays a Man into a lazy unthinking Temper, and staves off these wise Reflections, which would otherwise force themselves into his Mind. 'Tis certain, that if there be a God supremely Just, a future State of Happiness or Misery is a necessary Consequence; and if the Christian Religion is true, the vicious Person must have a very dismal and intolerable Fate.

Fate. The Prospect of endless Pains must give a Sinner Apprehensions, which he shall be as desirous to be rid of, as he is to follow his Appetites, without the bitter Allays of Shame and Remorse. And as 'tis much easier for a Man to lay aside the Thoughts of Religion, than persuade himself that 'tis all *Chimera*; if Inclination and the Love of Pleasure prevails with him, he naturally indulges the Want of Thought, as the only Antidote against a painful Reflection, and is glad to fortify himself against it, by an affected Heedlessness to the Arguments for Religion, and an unreasonable Fondness for every Objection.

FEAR is a strong Passion, and never fails to produce either a very good or a very bad Effect. If Apprehensions concerning the future have no Influence to reform, and make Men good, they usually put them upon a thousand Shifts to stifle the Thoughts of Religion, or to represent the strongest Arguments for it in a false Light.

SUCH a Conduct is too disingenuous to admit of Excuse; but were it never so just and reasonable, it is impossible that a Deist, or one who believes a God, should make himself easy in that Method. 'Tis not enough that he makes a hard Shift to reason himself out of revealed Religion, and that his Mind is Proof against the Threats of the Gospel. If he has any Notion of a God and a just Providence, he believes a great Deal too much

to be easy, or to be free from the Fears of Guilt. A Person conscious to himself of his own Actions, and sensible of the real Difference between Virtue and Vice, will find the Lash of his own Conscience, and the Torment of his own Fears, whatever Notion he forms of this or that particular Scheme of Religion; nor is there any Way left for him to be easy, while he retains any Notion of a Deity, or any moral Sense of Good and Evil: Would he lay a sure Foundation of sinning with Ease and Safety, he must overthrow the whole Scheme of natural as well as revealed Religion, and persuade himself there is no Avenger of Wickedness, as well as no Christianity.

BUT why should a Person dislike the Gospel, because it confirms the natural Fears of Punishment? If a Deist is obliged upon his own Principles to expect a future State, it will be strange Conduct to deny revealed Religion, because it yields a firmer Persuasion of it. A wise Man would know the utmost of his Danger, that he may be more upon his Guard; he will not readily imagine any Security too much, where the Interest is so important, nor be apt to reject any Motives to a good Life as superfluous, when he must confess, even upon his own Principles, that he stands in Need of that Assistance.

IT must be own'd, that Life and Immortality are brought to Light by the Gospel, and that we have more express and particular
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Notices of future Punishment by the Christian Revelation, than we could be able to read by the dimer Light of Nature : But whether a Sinner knows more or less of a future Punishment, his Guilt will produce Fear, and his Fear will be apt to expect the worst ; *For Wickedness* (as a wise Man observes) *is very timorous, and and being pressed with Conscience, always forecasteth terrible Things.* *

BUT let us suppose that Infidelity, and the Inconsiderateness which leads to it, could make a Man perfectly easy, it is plain that the Danger attending such a Conduct would be the same. The Nature of Things does not depend upon our Apprehensions ; the State of good and bad Men is fixed and immutable, whatever we are pleased to think, or whether we allow our selves to think at all. A Man who leaps down a Precipice runs the same Hazard, whether he is hood-wink'd, or his Eyes open, or whether he chuses to do it in the Dark, or at Noon-day.

IN fine, Let us put the Case, that a Person, merely by Inattention to the Evidences for Religion, could rid himself of all his Fears, without the least Danger. Let us suppose he was equally easy and safe, that Ease and Safety would be insufficient to ballance his Loss. It would be a very odd, and (if I may be allowed the Expression) a dismal Sort of Comfort, that a Man is not only safe from the Punishment, but incapable of the Happiness

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* Wisdom, Cap. 17. 11.

of a future Life; and that all his misplaced Pains to form Objections, and to defend them, would equally assure him, that he has nothing to hope, as that he had nothing to fear beyond the Grave.

WHEN Prejudice inclines a Man to one Side of a Question, he always overlooks the Merits of the Cause, and consulting only with his Interest or Passion, forms his Judgment according to their

Prejudices against Religion a very general Cause of Infidelity.

Determination. Under this Influence, a Man, tho' he has no distinct View of the whole Scheme of Religion, and the Grounds on which it is built, may however be as positive in his Judgment, and hardy in his Assertions about it, as if it had been the Study of all his Thoughts: But it is plain such a Precipitation cannot arise from a Love of Truth. A Man who is in so great Haste to be at the Conclusion, must be determin'd by something else than Evidence, and the true Grounds of Assent.

PARTIALITY of Judgment, in Matters of Religion, appears likewise in a suspicious Temper. Such an undistinguishing Suspicion, as inclines a Man to make all Cheat and Imposture, all Priestcraft and Credulity, which the wise and good Part of Mankind have alledged in Favour of Religion; an Excess of Caution, when Religion is the Matter in Question, and an Unwillingness to acquiesce in such Sort of Proofs for it, as are sufficient

cient to determine us in Matters of another Kind.

'T WERE easy to alledge Examples of this Partiality. Nothing has bred a more unjust and groundless Clamour against Revealed Religion, than that the Evidences for it cannot be brought up to a strict Demonstration, that the Certainty we have for it is not properly infallible; But what would Men infer from thence? Is nothing true which is not demonstrable? Are Men never determined by a lesser Evidence? Or is it Rashness to believe what is not as evident as that twice two make four, and that all the Angles of a Triangle are equal to two right?

THE Truth is, People never bethink themselves of such extraordinary Caution, but when Religion is concerned; they every Day act with Confidence upon a mere Probability, nay they are under a Necessity of acting in the ordinary Affairs of Life, upon a lesser Degree of Evidence, or of sitting still, and doing nothing at all. There could be no Traffick, if Men were not content to run Hazards; no considerable Gain, if they did not expose themselves to the Chance of a considerable Loss; in fine, we neither have nor can have absolute infallible Certainty in the Concerns of Life, and yet have sufficient Evidence to determine us. Why would Men therefore demand a Demonstration for Religion, when that Sort of Proof can scarcely be had for any Thing else? Why do they re-

quire an Evidence, which is peculiar to Matters of Science ? In a Word, Why don't they acquiesce in such a Degree of Certainty, as is all they could expect or require for Religion, supposing it to be true ? Such a Conduct plainly shows that they love to be in the Dark, and entertain a secret Desire that Religion may be found an Imposture.

ANOTHER Character of Prejudice or partial Judgment is an Itch to censure, and find Fault without any Reason. It would be needless to bring any Example of an Injustice, of which every Atheist, every Unbeliever, is remarkably guilty.

ONE who owns the Existence of an eternal Self-existent Being, must needs ascribe to such Being certain Perfections, which are far above the Reach of a finite Understanding, and whereof he can frame to himself no clear or distinct Idea ; and yet such a Person will pretend to object against the Christian Religion, that the Doctrines of it are absurd, merely because he cannot comprehend them. But sure, if this were a good Objection, nothing would be more incredible than the Being and Perfections of the Deity, as nothing is more difficult, or out of the Way of a finite Apprehension ; and therefore either this Objection must be good in both Cases, or in neither. For which Reason nothing but Prejudice can make a Deist lay any Stress upon it at all, seeing it is equally strong against the fundamental Principle of all Religion, (which himself
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acknowledges) as it cannot be supposed to be against the peculiar Doctrines of the Christian Religion.

THE ancient *Jews*, who rejected our Saviour's Pretensions, and the Miracles he wrought, were a notable Example of the same Partiality ; for while they refused to acknowledge certain Facts, to which they were Eye-witnesses, did not they, at the same Time, profess to credit the Miracles of their Law-giver ? Was not their Constitution founded upon them ? And did not they receive them upon the sole Authority of the sacred Books ? Our Saviour's Miracles were so many Appeals to their Senses, and so vouched by the highest Evidence ; the Miracles of *Moses* relied merely upon the Authority of Tradition. Now it is certain, that the Evidence of Tradition being at last resolved into that of Sense, the Credit of a written Report could never equal the Testimony of Eye-sight ; for this good Reason, that a Report, tho' never so well attested at its first Delivery, must needs have lost a little of its Evidence in the Conveyance. 'Tis plain therefore, that the *Jews* could not pretend to want Evidence, seeing our Saviour's Pretensions were founded upon clearer Proofs, than those they had already acknowledged, and could not be rejected without a disparaging the Certainty of their own Religion. But the Truth of the Matter was, their Minds was so perverted by Interest and Passion, that they could not judge equally,

ly, nor admit as a good Reason in one Case, which they freely acknowledged in another. From this Infatuation of Judgment, the same Persons greedily swallowed all the Absurdities of Tradition, while they rejected the best and purest Doctrine; tho' the last was in every Title agreeable to their own Books, and the first contrary both to that Rule and to common Sense. Nor are the ancient *Jews* the only Example of this unhappy Byass; their Posterity now a-days too plainly judge with the same Prejudice, of which the religious Tales they are so immeasurably fond of, and their profound Ignorance of a Religion which they mortally hate, are plain Indications.

BUT tho' hard Treatment may give some Account of their unreasonable Prejudices against Christianity; What Excuse can other Unbelievers plead for the same Partiality? And yet it would not be hard to give Instances of an enormous Credulity in these very Persons, who have required nothing less than absolute Certainty and Demonstration for the Christian Religion *.

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* Note, Superstition in an Atheist or Unbeliever must certainly pass for a very strange intolerable Fault; and yet there have been Abundance in whom these inconsistent Characters have been united. Some of the ancient Philosophers, who opposed the Christian Religion, were of this Sort; *Hierocles*, for Example, a Man of Learning, and a great Prosecutor, was credulous enough to acknowledge as Miracles the little *Legerdemain's* Tricks of *Apollonius Tyaneus*. *Julian* the Apostate is known to have been a Superstitious Observer of the

THE same Men who have laught at all religious Belief, as the Effect of Weakness, have yet been known to take all the Dreams of Astrology upon Trust, and to have had Faith enough for any incredible Story or incomprehensible Hypothesis, when they had no Interest to make Objections, or when their Interest favoured the Absurdity.

THE Prejudices we have just mentioned commonly take their Rise from certain vicious Qualities, which either hinder Men to apply their Thoughts to Re-

Prejudices against Religion arise from immoral Qualities.

ligion,

the Heathen Rites, and very much devoted to the Priesthood. And *Porphyry*, who left the Profession of Christianity from Disgust, was a Superstitious Bigot of the *Pythagorean* Sect. Some of the most eminent of our modern Infidels, have been of the same odd inconsistent Character, as is evident from their idle Dreams of Astrology, and vain Expectations from that Science. *Cardan* laid so much Stress upon it, that he pretended to account for the Rise and Progress of the Christian Religion, by the Situation of the Stars. See *Cardan in comment. ad Ptolomeum, Lib. 2. p. 369.* The infamous *Vanini*, who suffered for Atheism at *Tolouze*, imitated *Cardan* and *Agrippa* in the same Superstition: So that as the *Milan* Philosopher made the Horoscope of our Blessed Saviour, *Vanini*, after his Example, consulted the Stars about his own Fate. See *La vie de Vanini*, published 1717, and his *Amphitheatrum naturæ & provident. p. 25.* Indeed this Propension to Astrology seems to have been a common foible of modern Unbelievers. No less a Man than Cardinal *Richlieu*, whom we may justly reckon in that Class, was not only given to Astrology, but as *Monfr. le Clerque* observes, consulted all Kinds of Divination, even silly Women, whose Knowledge consists in Vapours, which make them foretel by chance some future Events; we learn from the same Author that Cardinal *Mazarine* his Successor was chargeable with the same Weakness. See his *Causes of Incredulity.* In fine, it were easy to show that those who have either denied the Being of God, or revealed Religion, have been left by a just Infatuation to credit the most unreasonable Superstition.

ligion, or if they do, defeat the Ends of Enquiry. This is certain that Men are not commonly determined in their Judgment of Things by their Nature and Evidence; and if a Man happens to be enslaved to any irregular Affection or vitious Habit, from Nature, Custom, or bad Company, it is more than a Hundred to one, that this Attachment either prevents Examination, or renders it unsuccessful. Nor is it hard to account for this Influence of the Affections upon the judging Faculty, seeing the Desire of Happiness is common to all Men; and no Satisfaction can be expected but by a Compliance with those Inclinations, which are either natural to us or acquired. Now as this Appetite of Enjoyment is both very violent, and the Nature of Religion gives a Check to its forwardest and most impetuous Desires; it is natural for Men to avoid all Thoughts of Religion, to the End they may not subject themselves, by a cordial Assent to it, to so painful a Self-denial; for if these are entertained, Men must either give up with their favourite Passions, or gratify them at the Expence of continual Remorse. To forsake our Passions is not to be done without a Resolution, which few are Masters of, and which the Author of our Being can only inspire, and to suffer the Pain of Remorse is an intolerable Suffering; to avoid which every Man who values his Ease must be willing to reconcile his Reason and his Appetites; and this cannot be done, unless

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Religion which plainly condemns the Gratification of the last, is proved to be a very groundless and unreasonable Thing : This is the true Cause of a Thousand vain Endeavours in Favour of Infidelity, by those, who as the Apostle describes them, *are Lovers of Pleasure more than Lovers of God.*

THAT this is the Case we have the Confessions of some who are known Enemies to Religion †. Besides Experience shows that a loose Practice is almost the constant Companion and Character of Infidelity; and that altho' there may be some few Examples of the contrary, yet these are not sufficient to overthrow a general Observation, that Atheism has so natural a Tendency to Immorality and Corruption of Manners, that great Integrity of Morals, is very hardly reconcilable with an impious Belief.

BUT of all the Vices which are incident to Men, Sensuality is a peculiar Hindrance to a serious Enquiry. A soft luxurious Life is a great Enemy to a diligent Search after Truth, as it emasculates the Mind, and leaves a Man as little Leisure as Ability for Reflection; but Debauchery or an abandoned Pursuit of Pleasure, is perfectly inconsistent with a free Examination. A Man of this Character, whatever his Parts may be, is never either cool and sedate, or disinterested and impartial enough to consider the Pleas that are brought

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† See Spinoza's 34th Letter to the Hier van Blegenbergh.

for Religion; he is never in a Temper perfectly free of Spight and Malice, or of Indolence and Sloth; he has not the Patience to go thro' a long Process of Reasoning, and indeed is incapable of so tedious and unwelcome an Interruption to his sensual Enjoyments.

BUT Partiality is the main Impediment. Let a Man of Pleasure, who hugs every Objection against Religion, and lays himself out to find Difficulties, lay his Hand on his Breast, and seriously enquire whether he would be so nicely scrupulous as to the Point of Evidence, concerning the Authority and Original of the sacred Books; if these allowed him all the Liberties he is fond of; whether, if he considered Religion as a Friend to his Favourite Affections, he would be at half the Pains to find it an Imposture, or whether he can pretend to act as impartially in his Enquiries about it, as a Man would do who had nothing to gain or lose by the Decision.

Pride and Ambition ordinary Causes of Incredulity.

IT is very hard to determine what Share of Moral Honesty may consist with impious Principles. This is certain that the Cause of Religion can gain no Advantage by an uncharitable Suspicion of its Adversaries, or an unfair Aggravation of their real ill Qualities: 'Tis possible that Men may take up bad Opinions, and be fond of them, without any Biass from Interest, or a Propension to Pleasure; ill Company and Want of Care to examine, or certain Prejudices consistent with

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Honesty, may dispose a Man, otherwise virtuous and moral, to be an Unbeliever; but it would be an Excess of Charity to suppose that any Man would throw off all good Principles, without any vitious Motive at all, or any Inducement which could be a Blemish to his Moral Character.

WHEN People set up for Unbelievers on the Foot of Reason, so as to form Schemes of Incredulity, and to carry on a solemn regular Attack upon Religion and Vertue, 'tis more than probable that Pride of Understanding, or an Itch of confuting the united Wisdom of Mankind, may be the true Cause of so strange a Conduct; and this mischievous Desire of Admiration, may be as strong an Ingredient in the Composition of a Speculative Unbeliever, as the Appetite of Pleasure is in the Constitution of an unthinking Atheist; nor is Pride and the Affectation of every singular Opinion, which may appear to be the Mark of uncommon Capacity, a weaker Motive, with the Man of Reason and Pride, than loose Desires are with the soft and luxurious: For it is as natural at least for the first to distinguish himself from the Herd, as it is for the last to indulge his Appetite.

* IT must be own'd, no Disposition of Mind so completely qualifies a Man to be an Unbeliever, as nothing gratifies a Man's Vanity so much as a Presumption that he and a
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* *Despicere undequas alios passunque videre errare, atque viam palantes quarere vita*, Lucret. Lib. 2.

few Friends who may owe their Discoveries to his Conversation are only in the Right, and all Mankind beside in the Wrong; and that he alone has Genius and Penetration enough to see through a religious Cheat, which has long imposed upon Mankind, or has Courage enough to trample upon certain dull Schemes of Morals, which the bigotted and credulous Vulgar adore.

WHEN a Man is once possessed of his own superior Capacity, he has already got more than half Way to Atheism. No sooner does he set his Face against Religion, than he will be apt to imagine that he has thoroughly confuted it. A Person of his Understanding need not submit to the dull ordinary Method of patient Enquiry; he can know the Strength and Weakness of an Argument, before he has given himself the Trouble to examine it; the least Hint is sufficient to undeceive him, and to place his Mind in a Situation far above the least Regard to received Opinions, and common Objections.

THE Opiniator is usually so confirmed in his own Judgment, that he scorns to attend to the Means of better Information; the silly Affectation of being ever in the Right, makes him incapable of a Discovery that he was ever in the Wrong, and so renders him as tenacious of Error, as he was ready to entertain it, as much above the Humility of Retraction, as he was above the Pains of Enquiry.

BESIDES, Ambition has no small Share in such an unreasonable Attachment; he has long passed for a *Virtuoso* among his Friends, and harangued with Admiration in a select Company; Would he easily give up with all his witty Triumphs against Religion? Would he sacrifice his peculiar Notions, and reduce himself to the Level of the Vulgar? Or would he expose himself to the Imputation of Cowardice or Inconstancy, by a professed Change in Favour of Religion?

IN fine, As a proud Man is sufficient in his own Eyes, for all Manner of Speculation, this Conceit puts him upon every Enquiry and Pursuit of Knowledge; and so while he grasps at all Science, he becomes Master of none, but is forced to take up with a superficial smattering Notion of Things, with no other Effect, than to please his Vanity, and to give him an Opportunity of setting his Parts to Show.

SUCH a Person, elated with the Opinion of his own universal Knowledge, will be apt to despise Religion as a low Scheme of Principles, as a narrow System, only fit for the Entertainment of narrow Minds, especially seeing the Christian Institution is so far from pleasing the Vanity of Men, that nothing can be more opposite to all its Pretensions, or more effectually confute the arrogant Opinion of human Sufficiency.

THE History of the Gospel suggests Ideas to the Mind, which cannot be acceptable to Pride and Vanity. It debars human Grandeur,
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and the Pomp of Life, by describing the most exalted Person in the meanest Circumstances; the Precepts of it are not better suited to such a Temper, unless an Obligation to put up Affronts, to think highly of others, and meanly of our selves, and to be always willing to stoop to the meanest Offices of Charity, can be thought agreeable to the Taste of a proud Man.

RELIGION every where disparages the Wisdom and Capacity of Men, and so lays the People of Genius and Learning under a peculiar Temptation to dislike it. Besides, there is nothing in the Doctrines of the Gospel, or the Style and Manner of their Delivery, which is very suitable to a polite Taste: Nothing which a Man who is in Love with his own Notions, or who piques himself upon Certainty and Demonstration, will be apt to admire; For what Philosopher would be apt to relish an incomprehensible Doctrine, or be content to give his Assent, where he neither has clear Ideas, or can possibly have them? Nay, What a Bondage of Understanding must he judge it, to be required to receive a mysterious Truth in Spight of a clear and intelligible Proposition?

THESE were Offences which the ancient Philosophers could never get over, who being accustomed to witty Speculations, delivered with all the Advantage of Language, had no little Contempt of a plain Story unartfully told. The Duties of the Cross, and the Mysteries of Christianity, were equally shoak-
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ing to their Philosophy, and their haughty Minds could not digest our Saviour's Resurrection, whatever Evidences were alledged in the Proof of it. Nor was it strange that Men should continue Unbelievers, who had laid down a Resolution to receive no Proposition for true, which they did not perfectly comprehend, and who treated every Opinion with Scorn and Disdain, which did not suit with their own Speculation.

A Person, who ever looked into the Lives of *Vaninus* or *Spinoza*, * or some others of the same

* 'Tis a sorry Way of defending Religion to rail at Unbelievers, as if their Cause could not be confuted without making their Character odious. That we may not seem to to take this Method, it would not be improper to quote some Passages from the Works of these Gentlemen, which are more than sufficient to prove what is alledged. We may judge what a good Share of Self-conceit, the Person had who suffered at *Tolouze*, by the first Page of his Dialogues, where he introduces his Friend, with this Complement to himself, *Bone Deus ! quantum iactura fit ab iis qui te non audiunt. Eja vir absque controversia de quacunque scientia optime merite. Non ego Thomæ Mori exemplum imitabor, qui cum Erasmum ignoto habitu differentem excipisset, ita dixit vel Demones vel Erasmus, sed ita de tua sapientia eloquor, vel Deus es, vel Vaninus.* *Spinoza*, another Writer of the same Principles, every where gives the Reader Marks of his Vanity and Ostentation ; as if his great Design was to pass for a profound Mathematician, all his Paradoxes are dressed in the Form of Mathematical Demonstration, an Appearance which is apt to please the Ignorant, but really of no Weight, seeing, as a learned Mathematician, Dr. Neiuwentyt, observes, People may be very well versed in these Ideal or Notional Sciences, and yet be Masters of very little or no Knowledge at all, in Things that actually exist and come to pass. It would be a great Omission in an Article of Vanity, not to mention Mr. Hobbs, who, in the Entrance of

same Character, cannot doubt that Pride had a great Share in their Unbelief. *Hobbs* alone was so strange Composition of Vanity, that he did not appear to have had so much Contempt for Religion, as for the Defenders of it; nor can he justly pass for a thorough Atheist, who every where makes a God of his own Understanding.

THE Pride of Philosophers or thinking Men is so great an Enemy and Impediment to true Knowledge, and especially to sacred Truth, that it will not be improper here to consider some of its ordinary Effects and Symptoms, and to make a few cursory Reflections, in order to show both the Folly and mischievous Consequences of such a Disposition.

A Man would be surprised to understand, that so obvious a Frailty was incident to Persons of Learning or good Sense, if these Qualities exempted People from the greatest Imperfections; or if the ordinary Effects of Pride in People of this Character, were not too plain to be denied, and at the same Time too pernicious to admit of any Apology.

INDEED there are so many Symptoms of this Disease in the Pursuits of the Mind after Truth

of his *Leviathan*, (and any Man who reads it well will be apt to believe him) honestly confesses that he is a Man who loved his own Opinions; nor was he singular in this Piece of Self-love, seeing all who have gone about as he did to overthrow Schemes of Religion, have been tainted with the same Weakness. See Mr. *Harris's* first Sermon at Boyle's Lecture, and *Lactantius de ira Dei*.

Truth and Religion, that a Man would be apt to judge, that *Pliny's* Character of human Nature was as true as it is severe; and that the Satyr of an inspired Writer, upon the Ignorance and Sufficiency of Mankind, was equally true now, as it was some Thousand Years ago, *That vain Man would fain be wise, when he is born like a wild Ass's Colt.* *

OUR Ignorance indeed is so great, that nothing but our Pride can exceed it; and what we want in Knowledge, we have the Pleasure to supply by Sufficiency. Every Man's Reason is the Measure of Truth, and his Ideas the Extent of Possibility, when, alas, Truth lies at the Bottom of a Well, and our Ideas are not Line enough to reach it; and we are so far from knowing what may be, that we cannot determine what is; so far from Certainty and Assurance, in ordinary Life, that we can scarce arrive at Probability, and are obliged to be content for the most Part with a glimmering Appearance of Truth, which is but the 'Twilight of Reason, and not many Degrees from down-right Ignorance and Uncertainty.

BUT how shall we mend the Matter, unless we would have another Nature and Faculties than God Almighty has given us? Ignorance is in a Thousand Instances incurable, with the best Opportunities, and the largest Capacity of Knowledge; 'tis the common Fate of the Learned and the Unlearned, the Scholar and the Plowman, the Man who has passed all his

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* *Animal. quo nihil, aut superbus, aut miserius.*

Life in retired Study and difficult Speculations, as well as the dull happy Man who was not made for Reflection.

NOTHING is more certain than this plain Observation, that our Knowledge cannot go beyond our Ideas, and those too which are clear and distinct : But alas our Apprehensions of some Things are dark and confused, and of many more we can have none at all. There are some Objects too near, and others too remote, to be capable of a distinct Perception ; some are so vast, that our Comprehension cannot grasp them ; and others so little, that we cannot lay hold of them ; the Lustre of one dazzles us, while we find nothing but Darkness and Obscurity in another ; the first overwhelms our Attention, and the last makes it very difficult and painful.

As there are few Matters we understand so thoroughly, as to form clear and evident Propositions about them ; so could we evidently perceive the Agreement or Disagreement of the Terms, we might at the same Time be far from Certainty, seeing real Existence, or the Truth of Things, does not always answer the Appearance. Our Apprehensions of Things vary, and we reject To-day, what we approved of Yesterday, and it may be will have very different Notions of it To-morrow. A plain Demonstration, that Truth and the Nature of Things, which is uniform and unchangeable, is not always expressed by our Ideas ; and therefore, that the evident Perception

ception of their Agreement or Disagreement, is not of itself a sufficient Criterion or Characteristick of Truth and Falshood.

BESIDES Experience teaches, that the same Objects bear a very different Appearance to one Man and to another, under the same or different Circumstances; that every Man has something peculiar in his Way of Conception, and that this Diversity admits of as great Variety, as the Size and Complexion of our Minds, or the Features and Constitution of our Bodies. Further, what shall we say of those Mediums by which the Images of Things are conveyed to the Brain. Can we be demonstrably sure, that our Senses do always or ever represent Objects to us, according to their real Existence; or that the Impressions upon the External Organ, are so faithfully communicated to the Brain, as to suffer no Manner of Change in the Conveyance? This we could not affirm, unless we were certain that the Nerves and animal Spirits perform their Functions always in the same Way, and without making any Difference in the Representation of the same Objects.

FROM these and other Causes of Difference we may certainly conclude, that our Ideas of the same Objects are never perfectly the same, at two different Periods of Life; and yet all our Knowledge lyes in a Faculty of putting these Ideas together, or separating them; in comparing one with another, and finding out their various Relations and Habitudes

tudes of Agreement and Disagreement. From this Difference therefore of simple Ideas, the Materials of all our Knowledge, there must needs arise a very great Variety in our Knowledge at different Times.

AND yet whether we argue upon this or that Side of a Question, whether we conceive the Images of Things, according to this or that Model, our Minds are equally affected with the Sense of Truth, and proceed with the same Assurance in her Determinations about it ; our Ideas of Likeness and Unlikeness is always the same, even when the Images of Things, and the Relations they appear to have one to another, are entirely different, unless when our Understanding happens to be in so odd a Situation, that it is equally moved with the Arguments on either Side, in which Circumstances we stagger and fluctuate, or rather our Judgment is suspended, and like *Buridan's Ass*, becomes incapable of determining either one Way or t'other.

THE Design of these Reflections is not to show that there is no such Thing as a certain Knowledge of Truth, but only that the clearest Apprehensions of our Minds are no certain Measure of real Existence, and therefore that we can make no just Conclusion from the Agreement or Disagreement of our Ideas, to the Disadvantage of revealed Religion ; seeing Truth and the Nature of Things is not always conformable to our Ideas.

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BUT sure, if Certainty is not always the Result of clear Ideas, it is much less to be expected in Matters, where we cannot pretend to that Advantage; and yet nothing is more common than for Men to argue from their Ideas to what really exists, and by a greater Stretch of Presumption to reason from their Want of Ideas to what is impossible.

TO this extraordinary Method of reasoning Men are beholden for their high and mighty Confidence, that Mystery is the same as Nonsense, and Miracle as Impossibility; for if they were put to the Question, they could hardly give a Reason for rejecting Miracles, unless it were that Experience never furnished them with any Instance of that Kind. But sure it cannot be more reasonable to affirm there never was a Miracle, because you never saw such a Performance, than it is to say, nothing can be incomprehensible, because then you could not comprehend it; but these are precarious and arrogant Suppositions, that your own Experience or Ideas are the Measure of Truth and Possibility, or that nothing is to be admitted as either true or possible, of which you are not able to form any Notion.

How rash a Conclusion is this, which is every Day confuted by every Man's Experience; no Body almost being so ignorant, as not to have found many Things at last to be true, which he considered as incredible at first Proposal. The Discovery of *America* furnished People with certain Accounts of Plants

Plants and Animals in that Hemisphere, which the most learned *Europeans* had neither seen or heard of before. Modern Travels have given a great Probability to some Relations in *Herodot*, and show'd that what had an Air of Romance in that Author, was neither impossible nor unlike to be true; and every Body knows that some modern Discoveries in natural Philosophy, admitted by the learned, and proved by undoubted Experiments, have passed for some Thousands of Years, for as errant Chimeras as the Notion of the Antipodes; now, seeing all this must be allowed to be true, why should People lay it down as a Principle in Religion, which cannot be admitted in Matters of daily Experience? Shall our Knowledge and Ideas be rather acknowledged as the Standard of Truth in Religion, than in Matters of Science, when it is generally owned, that the Subjects of Religion, are so far above our Comprehension, that we can have but few Ideas about them, which we can pretend to be clear and distinct?

Mysteries not
incredible.

As for Mysteries, or incomprehensible Doctrines, would our Vanity admit the Thought, the Nature of God is so little proportioned to our Faculties, that we always go beyond our Depth, when we endeavour too much to make it to be understood: And indeed 'tis so clear a Dictate of natural Reason, that an infinite Being must be incomprehensible to a finite Mind, that nothing but either a fond Pre-

Prefumption of our own Sufficiency, or a Design to make Difficulties, could put Men upon a curious Enquiry into his Nature and Attributes, or what is fit or unfit for infinite Wisdom to do. But what had become of the main Objections against Religion, if Allowance had been made for this Disproportion, when these are chiefly founded upon the incomprehensible Difficulties of the Divine Nature and Actions, inasmuch, that if Unbelievers were obliged to be silent upon this Article, they would want not only all their Philosophy, but at least two Thirds of their Wit.

AND here we have another Symptom, and a common Effect of Pride, namely a vain Pursuit of Knowledge without Ideas, and beyond the Extent of them.

Another Symptom of Pride, a vain Curiosity to understand what is incomprehensible.

By indulging such indiscreet Speculations, Men have not only thrown away their Time and Abilities, (which might have qualified them for great Improvements, if rightly employed) but have furnished Unbelievers with Arguments against Religion, and given no small Scandal to plain Believers, by intangling them in Disputes of great Difficulty, and no real Importance. All these Inconveniencies might have been prevented, had the inquisitive Part of Mankind confined their Enquiries to the Bounds which Nature prescribed to them. Had the Schoolmen, for Example, who have ventured farthest in the Depths of Speculation, made a truer Judgment

ment of the Nature of Things, and a modest Estimate of their own Abilities, the World had not been amused with vain Subtilties, which have only served to make Religion ridiculous to its Enemies, and difficult to its Friends; and in the End proved, that they equally misunderstood the Mysteries of the Gospel, and the Philosophy of *Aristotle*. But Men of subtile Wit, and Abundance of Leisure having once given themselves up to a vain Speculation, which they wanted Materials to employ, were under a Necessity of spinning Cob-webs out of their own Brain, and then having clapped upon them the Nickname of Philosophy, were not a little pleased with Notions which were entirely their own.

'Twas was the same Itch or Leprosy of Knowledge, which led so many ancient and modern Christians out of the beaten Road of solid Truth, into the most dangerous Opinions; I say it was the Vanity of pretending to explain and account for difficult Doctrines, of which they either had no Ideas at all, or none clear and distinct; and therefore could not possibly either explain or account for. By this Presumption it has happened, that Men of Metaphysical Wit have philosophized themselves either out of common Sense, or the Articles of Faith; and while the sacred Name of Truth has been every where, and by every Body usurped, all Regard to the Thing itself has been almost entirely lost, as well as all

success-

successful Methods of Enquiry after it strangely neglected.

BUT this is not the worst Effect of ill-placed Speculation. Not only has *Socinus* and his Followers taken up the baffled Weapons of the Schoolmen, and borrowed the most plausible Objections against the Truth, from these Learners in Language and Philosophy: But indeed all who have made any considerable Effort against natural or revealed Religion, have fought against Truth under the same Standard.

THESE Gentlemen had studied the Arts of Philosophy and Contention so long, till they were able to dress up Religion in any antique Habit, or Fool's Coat, as was most proper to raise a Laugh, and had acquired a competent Skill of making the gravest, the most absurd and ridiculous Appearance. But had the same Persons, who have indulged the Philosophical Humour, even to Atheism, and a Denial of that Truth, which is the Foundation of all others, been as sober and discreet, as they were subtile Disputants, Religion had suffered nothing by their Learning and Abilities. Had *Spinoza*, for Example, who was the first that pretended to reduce Atheism to a System, curb'd an Inquisitive Genius, and kept himself to the honest Trade of making Glasses, he had not disturbed good Order by a learned Sort of Jargon, nor subtilized his credulous Disciples out of all Religion, by a Scheme of Notions, which it is more than probable he did not

understand himself? Or had that young Rake *Vanninus* been content to rail at Religion in the Stile of a vulgar Atheist, he had not pursued his Enquiries so far, as to know the silly Things which Men of Learning may alledge upon an incomprehensible Subject,* and so wanted the Temptation to deny what the Philosophy of the Times represented as a Contradiction.

To add no more upon this Head, Our modern Unbelievers would have very little to say, if some Philosophical Divines did not supply their Invention with proper Materials. Had they wanted this Advantage, 'tis probable they would have gone on to laugh, without the least Pretence to Argument; nay 'tis possible they had been put to such hard Shifts, that from mere Necessity they might have returned to the old Road of believing some Things to be true, which human Reason could not fathom. 'Tis certain they would have been for ever incapable to argue themselves or others out of Religion, or to show any Wit in making a Jest of it; for which Reason they would have had no Temptation to laugh at all, and then all that impertinent Railery, which makes so great a Part of some Discourses upon Religion, had been spared, and all the

World

* Read *Amphitheatrum naturæ & providentiæ*, Page 10, where you have an impious Account of the Deity in the Language of the Schools, and the Confutation of it in the four Sermons of Monsr. Saurin, Tom 1. *Sur les profondeurs Divines*, P. 181.

World agreed to talk of a serious Subject in a serious Manner.

NOTHING is surer, than that a great Part of the Disputes which Christians have among themselves, and which have been and still are the Subject of endless Contention and Scandal, have been bred and cherished by an Itch of Speculation, and may be easily resolved into Questions of Philosophy ; with which had either Men not meddled at all, or managed with more Sobriety, they had not only saved themselves the vain Labour of writing so many unintelligible Volumes, but had likewise prevented the Hurt which Religion has suffered in the Scuffle. Christians had not been so much torn with the Briars and Thorns of Disputes, the Way to Heaven had been much plainer to all Sorts of Men ; nor would so many half Philosophers and through Atheists made Shipwreck of their Faith upon the hard barren Rock of Religious Controversy.

'TIS a Truth too obvious and melancholly, that nothing has contributed more to make Men Infidels, or to confirm them in their Incredulity, than the Differences among Christians. When Unbelievers observe the Defenders of the Faith titling at one another with the Weapons of Philosophy, and take Notice how much better they confute one another, than defend themselves, how many Triumphs are raised over this or that Denomination, one or t'other Scheme of Principles, they readily conclude, that the Christian Religion is really as indefensible as the peculiar Tenets

of a Sect. This indeed is a very rash Conclusion, but it is notwithstanding so common, and Men so readily go into it, that it may be there is no Way of preventing so fatal a Mistake, but for Christians to leave all Controversy in Favour of particular Opinions to the Disputers of the World, and to chuse some other Method of contending for the Faith.

'TIS certainly no improper Advice to young People, who, if their Heads are turned to Philosophy, are too apt to fall in Love with every Speculation, which wears the Face of it, and to follow this aukward Mistress so far in solitary By-roads, till they have lost the Way to Truth, and the Scent of it. By this Extravagancy it happens, that the Men of Study are commonly of all Men farthest from the Extremes of Devotion; Speculation too often begets Doubts, and entertains them, and Doubts seldom fail of ending in a Conclusion.

"AMONG all the Miseries (says an ingenious Author) to which Mankind is born, and subjected in the whole Course of his Life, he has this one Felicity to comfort and support him, that in all Ages, in all Things, every Man is always in the Right." This may probably pass for a satyrical Aggravation of human Sufficiency; however it is founded in a very true Observation, that as the Bulk of Mankind profess to adore right Reason, so they always understand by it their own.

Conceit of our
own Acquisition
in Knowledge,
a great Obstruction
to Faith.

AND

AND the Mischief is, Self-conceit is a Disease of the Mind, as difficult in the Cure, as it is common, and apt to take the fastest Hold of a learned Opiniator. Such a Person is so far gone, that a Man who undertakes him, must have himself a good Share of the Disease; he talks of nothing but Certainty and Demonstration, all his Conclusions are infallible, and you cannot dispute any one of them, without setting him upon the Cry, *Great is Diana among the Ephesians*. He is so entrenched within, Arguments and Authorities, that your best Reason can have no Access to him; and in Spight of all your Rhetorick, you may sooner persuade him that you are Sceptick or Atheist, than that a Person of his Reading and good Sense is capable of a Mistake.

BUT however hard it may be to bring People to Reason, who please themselves with the Fancy of an oracular Reason, or an infallible human Judgment; who can fathom the Depths of Nature, and trace her thro' all her secret Operations, who can describe the whole Process of the Creation, and the End for which every Thing was made; in fine, who without knowing what Motion is, or the Frame and Make of the meanest Insect, are yet learned enough to determine the precise Magnitude and Distances of the Celestial Bodies, to give a clear Account of their various Motions, and the Times of their several Revolutions; I say, however hard it may be to convince People of their Insufficiency, whose
Minds

Minds have run a Circle of Arts and Sciences, and seem to bear some Image and Resemblance of Omniscience : It will not be hard to persuade a modest Enquirer, who knows a little of the History of Learning, that neither the Ancients nor Moderns, whoever may be thought to deserve the Precedence, have any great Reason to boast of their Acquisitions. And seeing neither the Scholars of our Time, nor their Masters have made so good Use of a very long Experience, as to acquire the Knowledge of a Thousand useful Truths, which may be subservient to the Comfort and Welfare of Mankind ; and seeing their most undisputed Improvements in Knowledge are very imperfect, and accompanied with much Ignorance and Uncertainty ; such a Person will be apt to conclude, that those Faculties are not much to be depended on, which have hitherto done them so little Service, and that it is too late for Men to expect any great Improvement in the abstruser Sciences, the Speculations of Religion and Philosophy from that purblind Reason, which has so often fail'd them in the most useful and necessary Parts of Knowledge.

AND that these Defects of human Science are not to be ascribed to any particular Impediments, or native Incapacity, or to any Want of Opportunities, which some Nations might labour under, but to a necessary Imperfection and Weakness of the human Understanding, is plain from one Observation, *viz.* That the highest

highest Improvements of Knowledge have not exceeded a certain Pitch, and is always stinted to the natural Capacity of the Mind, beyond which it can no more Reach, than the Growth and Size of the human Body can exceed a certain Degree of Bulk and Stature, in Proportion to its particular Make, Exercise and Nourishment.

THUS whatever Variety there may have been in the State of human Knowledge; tho' Learning has often changed its Channel, overflowed its usual Banks in some Countries, and run almost dry in others, yet like Water, which can never be forced higher than the Fountain from which it proceeds, it never has nor can possibly extend beyond those Bounds which the Author of Nature prescribed to it.

IF we may credit a Person, who was no ill Judge of the Matter, the Physicks of all the ancient Philosophers, without excepting any, were ridiculous; and altho' later Improvements have brought this Science to a greater Degree of Perfection in all the Branches of it, than could have been well expected, yet it is plain Mankind are incapable of any through Knowledge of Bodies, as they are ignorant of their proper Essences, and consequently of the Essential Properties depending upon them; a Piece of Ignorance incurable by all the laborious Experiments of the most learned Society. And while from that and other Defects of human Knowledge, our Theories

ories of the Earth are raised, not upon a through Penetration of the Causes and Springs of Motion, but only upon own arbitrary Principles and narrow Schemes, the best Accounts of natural Philosophy must be chargeable with Difficulties, which none but a Philosopher's Understanding is able to digest. And till we arrive at such a Knowledge, that is, till God Almighty bestow upon us new Faculties, we may amuse our selves and others in raising one Theory and Hypothesis upon the Ruin of another, without the least Addition to our real Knowledge; and indeed we may judge how little of that Kind we may expect, when the greatest Philosophick Genius, which any Age has produced, was able to give us no better Account of the Motion of the heavenly Bodies; the Principle of Gravitation, and the Laws of a Motion, being as yet a dark Story, and it may be will continue to be so to the End of the World.

BUT it is not strange we should understand so little of the System of Nature, when Men are so much at a Loss about that Part of Knowledge, of which they are the greatest Masters; for tho' the Principles of Morals are capable of a strict Demonstration, the Application of these general Maxims to particular Cases, are and it may be ever will be the Subject of Contention.

WHEN Men consider their own Notions, abstracting from Nature and real Existence, they set themselves a-drift without any Compass

pass or Pilot, and are apt to lose themselves in an Ocean of Speculation, or they build Castles in the Air, and entertain themselves with meer Imagination: That Part of Science, we call Metaphysics, being a very barren Soil, which after it has been cultivated by the noblest Genius, has yielded nothing worthy of the Pains, as we may judge by the Performances of *Aristotle* in that Kind, which are so profoundly obscure, that one of his most learned Admirers could not understand them after a Twelfth Reading.

INDEED when our Ideas are the Measure and Standard of themselves, and are considered abstracted from the Nature of Things, we may reasonably expect Certainty, upon which Foundation are raised all the fine Demonstrations of the Mathematical Kind. However it cannot be denied, that Mathematicians have had their Disputes, as well as other Philosophers, and that there are more difficult Questions and Problems in this Science, than either *Archimedes* or Sir *Isaac Newton* was able to give an Account of; and it is not improbable that these Gentlemen would oftner fall by the Ears, and their Quarrels make a greater Noise, if they had the same Temptation to contend about Lines and Figures, which Men have to fall out about Morals and Religion.

THESE general Remarks upon the Subject of Learning, are not impertinent in an Enquiry into the Causes of Incredulity, as

they tend to show the Weakness and Insufficiency of human Understanding, whence a modest Man would conclude, that human Reason (so far we can judge by the Productions of it) is no such comprehensive Faculty, as some would make it, and cannot with any Pretence to Truth be considered as a competent Guide in the Way to Happiness.

A Notion as much contrary to the Sentiments of the best Heathen Philosophers, as it is contrary to later Experience*.

Now, if meer Reason is insufficient to show us the Way to Happiness, we cannot expect to attain, in the Strength of it, a firm and unshaken Belief of the Christian Religion; indeed nothing less than a Divine Illumination can beget in us such a Persuasion, in Spight of all these Difficulties and Objections which are apt to rise in our Minds against it; nothing less, I say, than a Divine Principle can subdue all our false Reasonings, and captivate our Minds to the Obedience of Faith.

To that blessed Spirit, who enlightens every Man, who comes into the World, and prepares the Minds of ignorant Sinners to receive the Truth in the Love of it, be all Glory and Praise, &c.

* The Learned Bishop of *Auranches*, in a Discourse upon the Weakness of human Understanding, has proved how little the best Philosophers trusted to the Dictates of human Reason, and how far they were from expecting Certainty in that Way; and it is the Observation of the Author of the *Leviathan*, that no living Creature is subject to the Privilege of Absurdity but Man only, and of Men those are of all most subject to it that profess Philosophy, *Leviath. p. 1. c. 5.*

F I N I S.

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PAge 9th, Line 2. dele to, P. 14. l. 10. *read* to suppose, *ibid.*
l. 22. *r.* probable Evidence, instead of *probable Cer-*
tainty, p. 27. l. 17. *r.* of Stiffness. Discourse III. P. 155:
Note, Line 8. dele *then*, and *r.* their Zeal, p. 164. l. 4. *r.*
has nothing, p. 173. *r.* Despicere unde queas, at the Bot-
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